‘Romances of Royalty and Romances of Chivalry:
a differentiation in the Middle English corpus’.

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ROMANCES OF ROYALTY AND ROMANCES OF CHIVALRY: A DIFFERENTIATION IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CORPUS

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The question I would like to address here is whether one ought to postulate not one, but two kinds of romances among the Middle English romances, no matter whether 'courtly' or 'popular'. I find that romances with kings for their protagonists are markedly different from romances with knights as protagonists. Therefore I should like to develop a hypothesis for the distinguishing of kingship-romances from knightly romances. It is based on a number of verifications which validate particular interpretations and invalidate others. I do not insist that the two groups are different in kind, but I will suggest that they require different models of interpretation. My hypothesis is based on narratological and structuralist principles. For a historical sketch of the development of the ethics of kingship and chivalry I refer the interested reader to Dennis Green's "The King and the Knight in the medieval romance" (Green, 1977).

My starting-point was that King Arthur, in romances such as *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, invariably appears to be inferior to, or weaker than, his knights, or is otherwise unfavourably compared to them. The reason cannot be that he is supposed to be seen as an inferior knight, I assumed. It must be that he has another role to fill: he represents, as king, the ideals and the wants of the nation as a whole, whereas the knights represent the ideals of its military elite (only). The actions of the king show the state of the nation; those of the knights show a private personal idealism.

Tennyson saw something like this when, at the end of "The Holy Grail" in *Idylls of the King*, he has Arthur say:

> "And some of you held, that if the King
> Had seen the sight he would have sworn the vow:
> Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
> That which he rules, and is but as the hind
> To whom a space of land is given to plow.
> Who may not wander from the allotted field
> Before his work be done ....
>
> (Tennyson, 1983: 230 ll. 899-905)

For Tennyson the keyword for the king, throughout, seems to be "war"; for the knights it is "rivalry". His distinction of the king representing an ideal and the knights trying, with more or less success, to emulate that, is too romantically tragic for the medieval romances, it seems to me, with their 'courtly' ideals of chivalry and their kings being something different and more ancient. We could explore whether there are, in fact, two

different kinds of idealism presented in the medieval romances, a knight's and a king's, and if they lead to distinct story-patterns or narrative structures.

Strictly speaking, such romances as *King Horn*, *Havelok the Dane*, and *Sir Orfeo* all clearly analyse kingship: they explore what makes a good king, and how we can tell, by contrasting different countries, by going to and fro between them. After all, the Fairy-king in *Sir Orfeo* is not much more or worse than a bad neighbour, a dark 'alter ego' or rival to King Orfeo, basically a malevolent and uncivilized ruler. Kingship-romances have to do with nations, whereas romances of chivalry are more often set in non-geographical settings. Erich Auerbach reads these settings as "a world specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself" (136) and works out that notion all through his chapter on "The Knight Sets Forth" (Auerbach, 1968:128-37). The King is the protector of the nation by carrying the burden of responsibility for the whole of society. The knights show the personal virtues required of the military elite for the protection of that society. In the romances of royalty the causal connections remain vague, it is true; they are replaced by structural repetitions. In the romances of chivalry those connections are somewhat more specified by rituals and recurrent symbols. The king always remains an 'embodiment' of his nation. John Stevens makes this point when he comments that King Arthur "does not stand for Man Alone", as the knights do, and describes the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as "a romance of society in which the society is represented by, and its values embodied in, the person of the king" (Stevens, 1973:91). The romances in which the protagonist knight becomes a king himself at the end of his quest stress that the personal virtues of chivalry are essentially social ideals, the way from 'protector' to 'embodiment'

Also the role of the ladies appears to be different. If, in the romances of chivalry, their role is to inspire individual knights to 'courtly' virtues, the queen in romances of royalty embodies the land; society as the country. When, for example, in *Sir Orfeo* Queen Heurodis is snatched away by the King of Faery, it symbolizes that the king has been robbed of his country. She is presented in a natural setting of the orchard and the grafted tree; he on barren ground in the wilderness after he has lost her.

In his chronicle-play *King Richard II* William Shakespeare provides an apposite example of how, in a narratological analysis, the queen may represent the country – as a physical entity –, while the king represents the nation – the collective interests of the people. In the famous orchard-scene (III,4) Queen Isabel and a gardener enact a little allegory of the state of England, its very soil and fertility, and how it should be tended, immediately following the scene in which King Richard has surrendered to Bolingbroke's force – as has the nation (Shakespeare, 1969:120-24). Following this line, I would argue that it would be helpful to consider that Queen Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, Goldborough in *Havelok*, and Queen Guenevere in the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, perform a comparable function of representing the land, with their respective kings representing the nation, the collectivity of the people. The collectivity

may be limited to the lower, peripheral nobility, or show the interests of the trading middle classes or of the common people specifically, depending on the romance in case. However, it is the king who embodies, or 'carries', the responsibility for them and, in the romances of royalty, it is the queen's actions (active or passive) that show their wants and demands.

The distinction between the romances of royalty and those of chivalry can even be seen in such apparently very similar narratives as Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. Behind the Old Hag dominating both narratives appears to stand the eleventh-century Irish story "Echtra mac n-Echach" ("The adventure of Eochaid's sons") (Aguirre, 1993: 274; see also Shepherd, 1995:378). This is the (mythical?) tale of an Old Hag turning into a young beauty as soon as she is wholeheartedly embraced. She declares herself to be the Sovereignty of Ireland. Manuel Aguirre claims that the "double land-and-woman theme" symbolizes that the queen "becomes not just the land but the territory, her prosperity being dependent on her choice of a rightful king. Because she is the bestower of royal power, to have her hand is to rule the kingdom, and therefore her wooer must be tested and the rightful king carefully chosen." Among the English cognates, he notices, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* is the only one in which the issue of territory is (still) present (Aguirre, 1993:278-79). King Arthur had unlawfully bestowed Sir Gromer's lands on Sir Gawain. The unlawfulness is King Arthur's problem, which Dame Ragnell (Sir Gromer's sister) forces him to correct by insisting on King Arthur arranging a marriage between herself and Sir Gawain, thereby making the sovereignty lawful. Dame Ragnell even promises to be obedient to her husband/ the ruler of the land.

Chaucer's Old Hag in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, on the other hand, promises to be faithful, true as a good wife in a personal relationship. Her "behaviour no longer has the sanction of symbolism found in [the sovereignty tale]" (Aguirre, l993:279). She is given the role typically played in the romances of chivalry: that of inspiring 'courtly values' in the knight (whatever Chaucer's opinion of that may have been). In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* the lady is teaching ideal chivalry to the knight, but she does not teach the king how to rule or protect the nation. The lady of *The Wedding* does precisely the latter. Whether these things are connected with fertility-myths or folklore, or with feudal arranged marriages where the ladies bring landed property to their husbands, does not matter for my narratological/structuralist analysis.

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* we have a typical romance of chivalry (if rather bourgeois-didactic) turning entirely on the conversion of the rapist- knight. The answer that he must find to the question 'what it is that women most desire' is also the answer to his problem. The striking thing in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* is that nobody is interested in the problem of what women most desire. Sir Gawain even refuses to take the problem seriously. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* this refusal to take the

question seriously is the problem. In *The Wedding* Sir Gawain's loyalty to King Arthur is unquestionable, here more than ever: he is willing to sacrifice himself to his king's interests. The king has earned this much of him, he states. Sir Gawain is implicated from the start, but the problem is an ethical dilemma for the king; to sacrifice Sir Gawain, to abuse Sir Gawain's loyalty, in order to save his own life. Can a nation demand the sacrifice of an able minister? is a well-known political problem. It is not presented as a moral problem here. King Arthur rightly suspects that the answer which he must find to the question does not lie in the problem, but in the question itself. This is where loyalty differs from chivalry, in these two renderings of the tale. King Arthur returns to the scene of the crime to address the question again anew, and finds the old hag, who enacts the question for him by demanding Sir Gawain in marriage. The monstrous truth (the ugly hag) that the king and Sir Gawain must face remains closely connected with her brother and the land question. It is this question of 'good government' that makes *The Wedding* a romance of royalty. The monstrous truth that the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* must face is, literally, his ugly view of women. That is a problem of chivalry.

So, having groped my way back via Tennyson, Shakespeare and Chaucer, I would now like to look at a few Middle English romances, both of royalty and of chivalry.

In *Havelok the Dane* we notice, as David Staines rightly points out, that the narrative does not emphasize what would be the natural or logical highlights of the story *qua* story, but places its proportional emphases on the moments in which Havelok's ideal kingship becomes clear (Staines, 1976:610-12).

There is, of course, the business of the kingmarks: the cross and the beam of light. From a parallel in *The Cloud of Unknowing* we know that the beam of light symbolizes a piercing of the cloud (recognition) to reveal God/ the King and also to kindle affection for Him in the recipient (Dolan & Scattergood, 1982:113). That the marks are shown to Grim and Ubbe, both in Denmark, is functional enough: it provides Havelok with allies in moments of need and sets the resolution going. In England they are only revealed to Goldborough, who has nothing substantial to offer at this point, though she is the rightful queen. It may gain her affection for her husband, but we are probably also to see this as a revelation or Havelok's promise of ideal kingship to England, to the country, represented by Goldborough. The dreams that Havelok and Goldborough have at that same moment explain the true situation, as Horn's dreams do in *King Horn*, and King Arthur's in various romances.

Then there is the business of Havelok's characteristic action: carrying. Havelok's progress is one 'from basket to crown', if what he carries on his head shows the man. When he decides to work for a living, in Grim's cottage, having just grown up, he does not go fishing, nor tilling the land, but chooses for *carrying* baskets on his head and shoulders. That is an action symbolic of kingship. This is the proper ritual for him, as the chess-game is for Floris, in *Floris and Blauncheflour*. The ritual's three

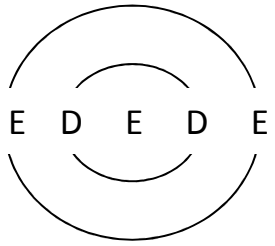
stages foreground it as a particularly significant ritual: first there is the daily carrying of baskets for Grim; then the carrying of the food for Godrich's cook; and, finally, the putting of the stone. In the latter two we see another striking difference with chivalry-romances: Havelok is not asserting himself against challenges of his virtue, but he is competing. He does not assert the validity of a virtue, but is showing himself *the best*, a king.

The decision to work for a living, to contribute to the general welfare, prepares Havelok for winning at the stone-putting, for which he 'gets the girl', wins the lady, the typical romance-symbol of achievement of manhood and knighthood. The ideal then becomes socially relevant. The fact that he gains a wife does not seem to be very operative in the story, but the fact that he has gained the rightful queen is his first step towards becoming a king. Goldborough represents England, as the very stone by which he won her also does. He is ready to 'carry' England. Strength has become power. In Denmark the situation is slightly different. The test there is defeating the sixty-one thieves, just as his father and King Athelwold had been famous for putting down thieves, as the opening of the romance tells us. Here Havelok is not competing; he must prove himself, like the heroes of old.

As I suggested earlier, romances of royalty depend on symbols and ritual ceremonies instead of causal relationships, as seen also in *King Horn*, *Floris and Blauncheflour*, *Sir Orfeo* and *Ywain and Gawain*. Romances of chivalry rely on symbolism as well, in order to explore the psychology of the knightly protagonists or their archetypal love-situations. In kingship- romances, however, the symbols and ritual ceremonies are more structural, exploring an archetypal *function*: that of the king. They control the narrative on a more impersonal level, defining kingship rather than the man.

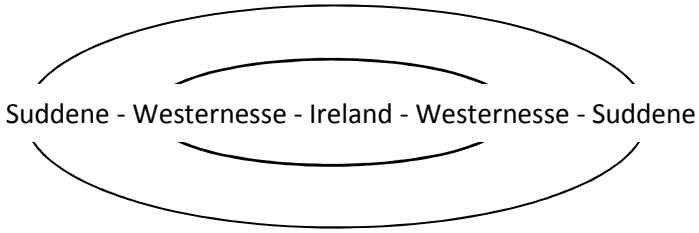
The differences between Denmark and England are stressed in the text from the beginning. England is presented as the ideal, in the long description of the reign of Athelwold. The notions of Godrich *swearing* to be a good steward, and promising to give Goldborough to the *best* man, are English. In Denmark the stress is on strength and authority: Birkabeyn is a strong king, he *entrusts* the stewardship to Godard. In good England Godrich behaves all right for some time before he turns mean gradually. In strong Denmark the royal children are thrown into prison straightaway. Denmark is also, as I said earlier, where the kingmarks procure the allies, the forces. One sees the glorification of the Danelaw kingship shimmering through this, the happy marriage of the best of Teutonic, as compared to the Anglo-Norman.

The idea of incorporating Denmark into England is suggested by the concentric-circle structure of the narrative, which opens in England, then moves to Denmark, then to England again, next again Denmark, then back to England.



The outer circle suggests Athelwold's ideal England and as it shall be again, and the core-experience is in England among the working classes. The ideal works outward from this centre, as it were. Denmark is embraced in this. It is a striking feature of this text that it is the middle-class and the lower-class chaps like Grim, Bertram the Cook and Ubbe who recognise their king and clothe him – a ritual investiture – while the nobles do not. In Grimsby in England Havelok's fortunes improve three times. It is a lower- and middle-class ideal of kingship that we see, in which the Danes are shown to have the better characteristics as men and the better social structure: Ubbe's judgments, hearing the people, a real concern for safety, are instances of that. That is what we see.

An analysis of the earlier *King Horn* yields the same picture; it has an equally marked pattern of different countries:



with a repetition of the last two as a coda, confirming the successful career. Or, in a more detailed structural analysis:

1. Suddene, lost
2. Westernesse, love
3. Ireland, proof
4. Westernesse, love
5. Suddene, regained
6. Westernesse, love
7. Suddene, reward

The story has a traitor, allies, prominently foregrounded feudal ceremonies, recognition tokens, dreams, a lady-love who has nothing substantial to offer except problems, like *Havelok* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and a loyalty-test like *Sir Orfeo*. The

combination of domestic treachery with foreign invasion in *King Horn* makes it more complex than *Havelok*. The idea that the king embodies the nation and the lady the land is very prominent here. The combined plotlines enable the recognition of Horn as king by Rymenhild (as land) to develop in significant stages. In contrast to her father, Rymenhild recognises from the start that she (the land) will need a protector after her father's death even before she has actually seen Horn. Conversely, Horn's identity reaches its full scope only by his identification with Rymenhild's needs.

Sir Orfeo also alternates between countries: starting in England, then Heurodis' dream of and abduction to Fairyland, followed by Orfeo in the wilderness in England (at the centre), then Orfeo in Fairyland and finally England again, where the recognition of the status quo and the rewards take place. So we have, again, a structure of concentric circles, with Orfeo by himself at the core.

When we contrast the kingship-romances in the preceding paragraphs with another concentric-circle romance, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, as I demonstrated on an earlier occasion, we see that in *Sir Perceval* the circles do not suggest an incorporation or embracing of countries, but of experiences (Veldhoen, 1981:279-86). If, as I believe, romance-heroes are defined by contrast with their opponents & obstacles – the opponents are typical of the hero, they 'make' him – we see that Havelok's opponents, Godrich and Godard, are much more 'external' than Perceval's mostly unnamed Red and Black Knights and Emirs. This makes a difference, a difference that in other genres even can be a fundamental one. For instance: external complications are typical of the way comedy resolves its plots, whereas tragedy cannot deal with them, except in a supporting role. In romances, too, external complications like the treacherous stewards in *Havelok*, or the Fairy King in *Sir Orfeo*, or the Emperor Lucius in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, stress the social aspect of these romances, whereas the Red-Knight type of challenger stresses the personal character-aspects of the hero. So kingship-romances tend to have more 'external' opponents and obstacles and thereby they demonstrate the *homo politicus* that the king is.

By the same token *Floris and Blauncheflour* would be a kingship-romance, which makes more sense to me than considering it as a romance of chivalry. Floris is training to become a leader, a master of men and situations, and what his final integrated *persona* has to offer is ruling-power, not any particular virtue. His love for Blauncheflour is the plot-motivation, in which Blauncheflour and his mother and Clarice function as representations of the interests of the countries (cf. Veldhoen, 1995:51-65).

Floris and Blauncheflour and *Sir Orfeo* are kingship-romances, in a way that *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are not: Sir Launfal and Sir Gawain, like Sir Perceval, represent specific single virtues, complicated perhaps, but not complex. Their opponents are not socially identified. In kingship-romances the conflicts are forms of protection: Havelok fighting the sixty-one thieves is protecting

Ubbe, or his wife, and later the countries. In the chivalry-romances the conflicts are self-assertions. Sir Launfal's virtue of generosity is complicated and restored by a lady who does have substance to offer (cf. Veldhoen, 1990:124, 126), unlike those in *King Horn* and *Havelok*; a substance that complements, in a symbolic way, the virtue that the protagonist already embodied. If, like Havelok, Sir Orfeo is competing – in his case competing in loyalty to one's promises with the Fairy King – Sir Launfal clearly is not. Sir Launfal gets himself into a conflict of loyalties and even breaks a promise, but the point is that in him the virtue of generosity must assert itself.

I am making such a big issue of these points because it is not always so self-evident. In such an obvious kingship-romance as the alliterative *Morte Arthure* we have the giant of Mont Saint Michel- and Sir Priarnus-episodes, in which King Arthur and Sir Gawain respectively assert themselves in, what appears to be, a purely chivalric manner. These episodes, however, make points about the characters of the two heroes within the framework of a story of kingship. The first can still be seen as essentially a part of the kingship-test, as the poet himself, in fact, stresses more than once in the episode. From the outset of the episode Arthur is presented as king:

> Then royal Arthur roared in grief for his people
>
> (Stone, 1988:61, l.888)
> (The translations are fairly accurate)

To throw the devastation of the region by the giant into relief, King Arthur is shown, symbolically, to approach the place through the pleasant lusciousness it should have possessed:

> They rode by the river which ran swiftly
> Where trees overreached it with branches in splendour.
> There the roe and the reindeer ran free and careless
> Among rose-bushes and shrubs, rioting in pleasure.
> The forest was flourished with flowers in plenty,
> With falcons and pheasants of fairy-like colours.
> All the birds flashed brilliantly, beating their wings,
> And the cuckoos clamorously cried in the groves,
> All delighting gladly in their limitless joy.
> The noise of the nightingales' notes was sweet:
> Three hundred of them with thrushes debated!
> The swift waters' singing and the warbling of birds
> Might cure a man quite who was chronically ill!
>
> (Stone, 1988:62, ll.920-32)

About the antagonist it is remarked that he is living

> … outside the law, as his liking determines,
> Not empowered by the people as a prince with rights.
>
> (Stone, 1988:64, ll. 996-97)

Hearing about the giant's atrocities:

> Then this comely king, on account of his subjects,
> Bled at heart with bitter grief, …
>
> (Stone, 1988:66, ll.1053-54)

and he goes to the attack, a single combat, but markedly as a king acting for the nation's need. When the monster has been killed, single-handedly by King Arthur, the victor is welcomed back by his army again markedly as their king:

> By then a clamouring crowd had come to court,
> Who united in kneeling to the noble king:
> 'Welcome, liege lord! Too long you have been away.
> Our governor under God, great in splendid action,
> To whom grace is granted and given at His will,
> Your happy coming confers comfort on us all!
> In your royalty, right revenge you render your people!
> By act of your hand our enemy is destroyed
> Who overran your ranked knights and robbed them of their children:
> Never was realm in disarray so readily relieved!
>
> (Stone, 1988:70-71, ll. 1198-1207)

In spite of the typically chivalric single-combat approach of the episode, the giant is, after all, in a way, a typical opponent for a king, because he is an insult and a threat to country and people, not to any individual virtue. The fact that he has killed a duchess makes him, by the logic of the romance of royalty, a ravager of the country. John Stevens sums this up by claiming that "Arthur's responsibilities are almost always communal; he acts and decides not as an individual ... but as the embodiment of Britain, as warrior-chief, religious leader, patriotic conqueror and courteous king" (Stevens, 1973:92).

Moreover, there is the ironic joke about "the saint of Mont Saint Michel" to whom they are making a pilgrimage, in the same spirit as the joke about St Veronica during the boasts against the Emperor Lucius in the beginning. All this suggests that King Arthur is taking action against a traitor in the realm, rather than the knight Arthur asserting himself against a monstrous opponent of giant size to show his own stature.

This suggestive pattern also makes it a satisfying prefiguration of Mordred's treachery to come.

The Sir Gawain-Sir Priamus episode, however, cannot be so satisfactorily solved, even if it also functions as a prefiguration of Sir Gawain's rash action against Mordred later on, which will cost the former his life. It tells us, at least, what kind of men are with the king, and so it enriches the picture of Arthur's kingship considerably. King Arthur's expansionism in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, following Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon, is imperialistic, in contrast to the usual role of the king as protector of the nation. The alliterative *Morte Arthure* belongs to the tradition of the death of King Arthur being a tragedy of fate, with a hint of *hybris* on the king's part. Sir Gawain's provocation of the Emperor Lucius is presented here as an act of epic heroism or epic boast, belonging to the kingship-romances, rather than as an example of chivalry. The prominence of King Arthur's mourning over Sir Gawain's death establishes the link with the king's responsibility. Sir Gawain's pride is connected with the king's *hybris*. Possibly his chivalrous dealings with Sir Priamus, which win a powerful ally for the king, may be seen as a critical alternative to King Arthur's *hybris*. Structurally, Sir Priamus marks a turning-point in King Arthur's war. The former's claim to be a descendant of Alexander, Hector, Judas Maccabaeus and Joshua (ll. 2602-06) introduces the theme of the Nine Worthy, which appears again in King Arthur's second dream, the dream of Fortune's Wheel (ll.3221-3455). It presages Arthur's fall, just as the first dream, preceding the Mont Saint Michel episode, augured his rise. The structure suggests unmistakeably an epic/tragic romance of royalty. If that is a paradox, so was King Arthur's reign also in this particular tradition.

Conversely, in such an obvious romance of chivalry as *Sir Degrevant* the opponents seem to be 'external', socially identified: a neighbouring earl, and later a rival-lover duke. This may look like a territorial conflict, but it is about property as status, about what 'makes' the man, not about protection. As Piero Boitani points out, the real concern, apart from the model love story, is with identity and social status (Boitani, 1982:57), so self-assertion after all.

In the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, the story of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenevere as causers of the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, the absence, or scarcity at least, of external opponents makes this romance seem much more a romance of chivalry than one of royalty. In contrast to the Geoffrey of Monmouth-Layamon-alliterative *Morte Arthure* tradition, in which King Arthur's pride and the heroic tragedy of imperial aspirations are made the cause of the king's downfall, the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* appears to analyse the conflicts, contradictions and superhuman idealisms of chivalry itself, on which King Arthur's kingship is based in that tradition. The king and queen retain their representative roles for nation and country, but the emphasis seems to lie on chivalry in action. The kingship is imprudent and impotent, but it appears to be a story of Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain, not of the king.

However, Queen Guenevere's role in it as representative manifestation of the country is prominent: why else would Mordred desire to marry her? The text says:

> He wished to wed his father's wife,
> Which many men abhorred.
>
> Great were the gifts and feasts he gave
> With lavish pomp and show,
> And people said his rule brought joy,
> Arthur's but grief and woe.
> So good allegiance turned to bad:
> The hearts of Englishmen
> Deserted Arthur and their vows
> Were made to Mordred then.
>
> (Stone, 1988:281, ll. 2960-69)

The text appears to be equating the queen with the interests of the land. The people considered life under Mordred more desirable than under the protection of the intransigent and vindictive King Arthur. Why, indeed, does Sir Lancelot desire her, or the queen him, for that matter? It is the country that desires the love and loyalty of a Lancelot, a French flower of chivalry, because King Arthur's idea of nationhood (imperial state) is no longer in the country's vital interest. This, at least, explains the general respect and reverence for Sir Lancelot all round. This text was written, after all, during the Hundred Years' War. King Arthur and Sir Gawain only impose their intransigence against this interest of the nation, their uncompromising, implacable stubbornness, a quality of kingship also condemned in *Athelstan*.

Reading the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* as a romance of chivalry, one is more likely to see Queen Guenevere as the typical Courtly Love lady, and to see Courtly Love (pardon the term, but that is another matter) as the reason for the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, because of the fundamental conflicts of loyalty it evokes. This reading was the popular one of the fourteenth century bourgeoisie, when the, by now nostalgic, romances tended to be more interested in the conflict of human character, and less in the moral or ethical questions, as witnessed by Malory (Stone, 1988: 175 and 180-81; also Benson, 1994: 4).

Since the nineteenth century we have come to see that such a chivalric reading is a simplification of the issues. Even if William Morris' "The Defence of Guinevere" is a highly romantic reconstruction, and a plea for an aesthetic idealism rather than for a social one, it shows an awareness of a greater complexity of duties and responsibilities than Courtly Love alone can account for. The queen's claim that the knights' truth is not her truth is made powerfully clear. Even accepting that a dramatic monologue is not necessarily right, but only true to the character, we are nevertheless

made aware that the Queen and the knights both have made choices. Guenevere's was to love knighthood in the best knight there was: Lancelot, even if this choice felt like slipping. The King had, after all, given her only his "great name and his little love" (Morris, 1973:5). But the knights' choice (of chivalry) has made them uncritical and unmerciful, pitiless in their self-righteousness. With Sir Lancelot the Queen could realize and also escape the fact that things had gone wrong already before her sin. What we have here is a bourgeois criticism of chivalry as it operates in society, a king and queen almost handicapped by the chivalric idealism of the court they head: a courtly idealism that, in the (bourgeois) eyes of the country (represented by Guinevere) is not in the social interest.

If I add that the various Holy-Grail stories – although based on a different ideal – had hinged on a similar criticism of the pitiless self-righteousness of the courtly ideal of chivalry, that is only to show that Morris' view is not merely a romantic reconstruction with hindsight, but a perception of the complex relationships and loyalties that romances such as the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* explore in their way. The purely chivalric reading of *Le Morte Arthur* as a Courtly Love tragedy leaves too many aspects out of consideration. So I think a 'romance of royalty' model of interpretation is more to the point.

When I summarize this sketch of a hypothesis by saying that in romances of royalty the queen represents the land, and in romances of chivalry the lady represents civilization; that kings represent the nation, knights the ethos of the fighting aristocracy; or, that kingship-romances slip more easily into epic significances of protection, which romances of chivalry cannot; or that the storylines of romances of royalty tend to be concentric-circular, whereas the quests of romances of chivalry are more commonly linear series of tests progressing towards achievement of the ideal virtues of chivalry, I hope it will be accepted that I do not mean this as a search for reductive common elements. I am looking for responsible interpretative models and their signals. I am trying to establish the themes on which the variations are played. But, in each case, the variations must carry the conviction.

If the emphasis tends to lie on the ladies rather heavily, this is for practical reasons: they are more stable in any story, in the narratological sense. In his analysis of the *Nibelungenlied*, Jan de Vries postulated that medieval heroes are torn between three worlds: the mythical (dragon-slayer, seasonal functions), the *comitatus*, and the courtly-chivalric world. They are always in all three simultaneously and can, therefore, never be in just one of them without damage (de Vries, 1959:65-67). They can never be fully themselves. The ladies, on the other hand, always know where they are and they always fit their worlds perfectly. Therefore they also help us to know where we are.

This is, possibly, more prominent in English literature of the age than elsewhere, because England has had centralized royal government from the Norman Conquest in 1066 AD onwards. Another reason might be that the composers of the

romances were not so often connected with the central royal court. The non-aristocratic minstrel composers are more likely to present more popular or middle-class viewpoints of kingship and chivalry. Outsider views tend to be more critical, and to be more 'coloured' by the interests of the lower classes.

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