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Article

Published Version

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It would be a very interesting experiment to ask a group of scholars to write a short account of some striking passage from a medieval romance, which could then be compared with the original. It is my belief that a significant proportion of those accounts would be coloured here and there by touches of humour which were not present in the original romance texts. This is a phenomenon which I have frequently noticed in listening to scholarly papers, reading articles and books of criticism; even in preparing my own lectures to students - and it was this last discovery that led me to try to investigate further. Why is it that one finds examples of intrusive humour, whether intentional or involuntary, in the retelling or summarizing of medieval romances by scholars, critics, and other readers, right through from the revival of interest in the romances in the late eighteenth century up to the present day? What is the significance of the fact that appreciative and serious readers of romance can respond to the texts in this way?

As a preliminary example, I shall examine three different versions of the story of Arthur's conception and birth. The first comes from Joseph Ritson's pioneering work of scholarship, *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*,[1] an edition of twelve Middle English verse romances, prefaced by a lengthy, scholarly dissertation on the function and status of minstrels, and furnished with comparative notes. The tone is severely learned; very few value-judgements are adduced - indeed, only two of his romances receive the editor's praise: *Emare*, 'this ancient and excellent romance', and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, 'this excellent old romance', and even so it is not at all clear whether Ritson is admiring the literary qualities of these poems, or the purity of their textual traditions. All the intellectual energy and literary excitement of Ritson's work is to be found in his lacerating attacks on the errors of his fellow editors and scholars; on Warton, for example, who 'thinks he has "seen some evidence to prove" ' that Thomas

Chestre was the author of *The Earle of Tolouse*: 'it is a pity he could not recollect where or what, as no one ... has been equally fortunate' (III, 343). On Tyrwhitt: his spelling of *wa la wa* 'was not only inexcusable, but inconsistent with his own practice' (III, 281). His keenest scorn is reserved for Bishop Percy, and over the authenticity of a disputed line of verse Ritson allows himself this contemptuous tirade: 'This ... is an INFAMOUS LYE; it being much more likely that he himself, who has practise'd every kind of forgery and imposture, had some such end to alter this line ... "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye" (I, cxliii).

This is Ritson's account of Merlin's part in the early history of Arthur (it occurs as a note on the mention of Arthur in the romance of *Launfal*):

> In order to enable Uther Pendragon, king of Britain, to enjoy Igerna, the wife of Gorlois duke of Cornwall, [Merlin] transform'd him, by magical art, into the likeness of her husband; which amorous connection (Igerna being render'd an honest woman by the murder of her spouse, and timely intermarriage with King Uther) enlighten'd the world, like another Alcmena, with a second Hercules, *videlicet*, the illustrious Arthur. (III, 247).

Ritson's tone here is not immediately clear: the classical allusion might seem to elevate and sanction the medieval story, yet there seems to be a biting irony in the juxtaposition of the colloquial phrase 'render'd an honest woman' and the fortunate notion of the 'timely intermarriage', with the casually interposed mention of 'the murder of her spouse'. The same mordant wit is evident in his authenticating the story of Merlin's imprisonment by Viviane with a reference to Cornwall, 'where, if the creditable inhabitants of those countrys may be believe'd, he stil remains in that condition ... haveing himself been never seen by any man, who could give intelligence of it'. It seems to me that the peppery, ironic humour in Ritson's retelling of the story of Arthur and Merlin is of a piece with his sarcastic sallies against his fellow-scholars, partly an expression of his personality, no doubt - see, for example, the extraordinary personal outburst at the end of the Preface - but partly also a result of the scrupulous, rationally based scholarly endeavour which produced the edited collection of romances,

while at the same time being fundamentally unsympathetic to the nature of romance narrative.

Three years after Ritson's publication George Ellis brought out another selection of texts, very different in appeal, his *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*.[2] Whereas Ritson had addressed his collection to the scholar requiring accuracy and completeness in his editions for purposes of learned research into the 'progress of English poetry' or the illustration of obscurities in 'our ancient classic poets', Ellis meant to interest a wider public, and to this end he rendered the romances into modern prose, laced with frequent extracts of the original verse. His whole intent was to prevent the reader from becoming bored by narratives which he freely admits, despite their 'considerable merits', can be 'deplorably dull', 'long-winded', 'tedious', and 'encumbered by many absurd fables and strange and unnatural ornaments'. An excellent example of how he achieved this popularizing aim can be seen in his version of *Merlin*.

> Happy are the Kings whose ministers happen to be conjurors! Uther had the good fortune to close the list of his sanguinary conquests by the more flattering though not very honourable victory which he obtained, by the assistance of Merlin, over the beautiful Igerna, whom he enjoyed, under the shape of her husband the duke of Cornwall, in Tintagel castle ... Merlin, it seems, had exacted from Uther, as the price of his complaisance in furthering his majesty's amours, the absolute right of directing ... the nurture and education of the boy who should result from them (pp. 102-03).

In a very recent study of early nineteenth-century interest in Arthurian literature, Ellis's tone is characterized as 'urbane' and mildly ironic, the product of an 'Augustan' taste.[3] This is clearly right; and though very different from Ritson's tone in other ways, Ellis's does equally reveal the attitudes of a modern rationalist who maintains a superior and enlightened distance from the perceived absurdities of the ancient poems. Ellis's retelling is entirely good-humoured, the 'elegant wit' which his contemporaries admired appearing in the ironic discrepancy between his easy, polished style and the unbelievable incidents he relates. Where Ritson had presented Uther as 'another Jupiter', pursuing his desires with Ovidian mythopoeic logic: the metamorphosis and rape being justified by the resulting birth of the

hero; Ellis on the other hand makes Uther sound like a licentious seventeenth-century monarch, indulging his adulterous passions with noble court beauties, and providing for the upbringing of the royal bastards. Ritson had implied savage contempt for the morality of a tale which seems to sanction adultery by an expedient murder; whereas Ellis glosses over the death of Igerna's husband, manifesting instead a wise, worldly tolerance of the flawed values which would accept a king's victories in the bedroom and on the battlefield as equally fortunate and historically important.

The third summarizing of the story of the conception of Arthur that I want to consider is this very brief one, taken from A.B. Taylor's *An Introduction to Medieval Romance*: 'In Geoffrey's chronicle Igerne's husband dies immediately after her adultery with Uther, which was very convenient for all parties'.[4] Taylor's wry, laconic humour here is like a conspiratorial wink indicating to the reader that Geoffrey has not told the whole truth about the death of Igerne's husband, and that the chronicle need not be taken seriously as a piece of responsible narrative.

What these three extracts show is a persistent, but varying phenomenon of intrusive humour. Early antiquarian scholars tended to adopt a pervasive patronizing attitude to their sources, which shows itself in burlesque summaries or arch rephrasings of the original. Medieval romances were thought to provide valuable insights into the manners of their age, and sometimes to contain the spark of heroic invention - but as narrative fictions they were seen merely as primitive and barbarous beside the highly developed and sophisticated products of contemporary novelists. Modern critics are likely to surprise the reader with an occasional remark in a humorously colloquial style that seems out of keeping with serious criticism, and perhaps betrays an underlying attitude no less patronizing than their predecessors'. Taylor wrote of 'the folly of taking such romances seriously', and a more recent critic alludes to 'exploits that Malory enjoyed recounting but that the modern reader finds boringly repetitive'.[5]

The work of most early nineteenth-century antiquaries pursued the double purpose of recovering the forgotten literature of chivalry and of making it attractive. Where the more utilitarian Ritson's sole and rare term of praise for a romance is 'excellent', the one most frequently used by his contemporaries is 'amusing'. Halliwell describes *Sir Percyuell of Galles* as a 'prettily written and amusing romance';[6] and John Ashton, introducing his volume of *Romances of Chivalry* sums

up the popularizer's creed: although Ellis's *Specimens* is 'the best book of all on the subject [of medieval romance], its usefulness is marred by that awful word "antiquarian". People will not believe that anything can be amusing if under that heading'.[7] Unfortunately Ashton took the need to amuse his public too far, and retold his material with a degree of irony so pronounced as to represent the originals as merely ridiculous. Ellis's humorous style in his retellings of the romances may conveniently be taken as representative of the nineteenth-century norm in this field, for his *Specimens* was very influential and enjoyed enormous popularity, going through two editions (1805, 1811) before being revised in 1848 by J.O. Halliwell for Bohn's Antiquarian Library in a cheap and attractive pocket format. It undoubedly did much to form the reading public's perception of medieval romances; to quote Sir Walter Scott, Ellis's humour 'gave life ... to compositions which had till then been buried in the closet of the antiquary'.[8]

In the first place, a humorous effect is often achieved merely by the contrast in style when Ellis's elaborate, polysyllabic, syntactically complex modern prose is juxtaposed with the apparent simplicity and archaism of original quotations. But Ellis is rarely content to summarize the romances without some narratorial colouring: the frequent addition of brief adjectival or adverbial words and phrases is enough to invite the reader to share in a detached amusement at the expense of the narrative techniques of the romance. Favourite words are 'luckily', 'fortunately', 'unexpectedly', 'incidentally', 'as might be expected'; aggressors are always 'formidable', and sufferers, whether innocent or guilty, are invariably described as 'the unfortunate x' or 'the wretched y', victims of absurd situations. It is obvious what is covertly happening here: ridicule is being directed at the plotting of the romances, either for being unbelievably dependent upon coincidence, or for being all too predictable; heroic conflicts are being undermined by suggesting that the power of the combatants is exaggerated; and the justice by which the hero triumphs and his opponents suffer is being questioned by the intrusion of sympathy-seeking epithets.

More marked instances of condescension towards the romances can be seen in several comments in the editor's own voice upon the conduct of the story by 'our author'; for example, relating 'the loss of 415 combatants' Ellis adds in an aside '(our author is very exact in his numbers)' (p. 108); naming 'the illustrious characters' who formed the procession to King Leodegan he remarks that 'the author thinks that it will be very comfortable to his hearers to know the names' (p. 119);

introducing a digression in the narrative he exculpates himself by noting that 'the author here takes occasion to inform us of a circumstance, very notorious at the time of these events' (p. 117). It is clear that the author of *Merlin* is thought to be an incompetent workman with a disproportionate liking for irrelevant detail and little sense of narrative unity. Ellis himself, of course, shows no recognition of traditional features of romance narration, and little sympathy with improbable fictions.

Scenes which are treated with particularly unsympathetic wit are love scenes and battles. In his précis of Chrétien's romance of *Le Chevalier de la Charrête* Ellis gives this account of Lancelot's behaviour on seeing a lady far off through the window: 'he recognized a likeness to the fair Guenever, [and] suddenly fell down in a swoon; an accident very usual with amorous knights, but always productive of wonder and curiosity in the by-standers' (p. 147). The love of the Fair Maid of Astolat from the stanzaic *More Arthure* receives similarly arch treatment: 'before the conclusion of supper [the young lady] became so deeply enamoured of him, that, after frequent changes of colour, and other symptoms which the experienced Sir Lancelot could not possibly mistake, she was obliged to retire to her chamber' (p. 155). It is not surprising that so determinedly rational a reteller should find the refinements of romantic love ludicrous. On battles, though, he has a more serious objection behind his ironic wit, as is made explicit in the episode of the fight against the Saracens in *Merlin*:

> Our poet, who is never tired of describing such scenes, has painted every circumstance of the combat with the minuteness of an eye-witness, and with a degree of delight and satisfaction in which the modern reader would not easily participate. Suffice it to say, that ... the Christian heroes ... made as extensive a carnage among the infidels as the worst enemy of paganism could conscientiously wish to contemplate. (p. 133)

Nevertheless, Ellis has retold other battle scenes from this romance in a manner so detached that his irony has the paradoxical effect of cruel and cynical unconcern for human suffering; in Arthur's war against the rebel kings, for example, 'many fell on both sides by wounds which exhibit great anatomical variety' (p.112); and in the first fight with the Saracen army, when Gawain and Galachin have each killed a king,

Ellis continues: 'Agravain, having no kings immediately within his reach, amused himself with the necks of plebeians, which he cut through by dozens at a time, till he formed a circle of dead bodies to his satisfaction' (p.117). This excess of irony is no doubt the result of a conviction, shared by many early critics of chivalric romance, that the battle scenes are the most tedious and repellent feature of the genre to a modern reader, and so presumably need extreme measures to make them palatable. As has already been seen, Ellis will readily pass over large tracts of detailed description of fighting with a single dismissive statement, and in this he is typical of his contemporaries. Robert Southey, for example, explains the method of his translation of *Amadis of Gaul* as follows:

> To have translated a closely printed folio would have been absurd. I have reduced it to about half its length, by abridging the words, not the story; by curtailing the dialogue, avoiding all recapitulations ... consolidating many of those single blows.[9]

This necessity of abridging chivalric romances before modern readers would tolerate them was a generally accepted truth; according to Sir Walter Scott, 'our ancestors could wonder and thrill through all the mazes of an interminable metrical romance ... but our own habits and feelings and belief are different, and a transient, though vivid impression is all that can be excited by a tale of wonder in [a] mind of the present day'.[10] Scott is here discussing Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765) which he describes as 'the first modern attempt to found a tale of amusing fiction upon the basis of the ancient romances of chivalry'. Abridgement was the first necessity, but just as important in adapting the character of medieval romance to the taste of a modern audience was the introduction of psychological verisimiltude. Of Walpole, Scott continues: 'it was his object to unite the marvellous turn of incident, and imposing tone of chivalry, exhibited in the ancient romance, with that accurate display of human character, and contrast of feelings and passions, which is ... delineated in the modern novel'. Perhaps a similar motive lies behind another typical feature of Ellis's retellings, explanatory additions relating to the characters' feelings, for example: 'Sir Gawain, boiling with impatience ... counted every minute as it passed' (p.145); Arthur, stung with this unexpected reproach, flew to[wards the enemy] (p.124); 'the holy Blaise ... feeling

a fatherly affection for the three orphan sisters ... imposed on each a proper penance' (p.83); 'Leodegan ... then living in adultery with the beautiful wife of [Cleodalis] ... implored his forgiveness ... Cleodalis, of course, forgave him as fast as he could, not only because he wished to waive a disagreeable subject' (p.142).

The ironic tone of these narratorial insights might seem to deny them a serious claim to a novelistic concern with human motivation, but here a note of caution must be sounded. It is possible that the lapse of almost two centuries has accidentally enhanced the humour of Ellis's prose; there are numerous passages in the novels of his contemporaries which sound surprisingly similar. Furthermore, Scott's remarks on *The Castle of Otranto* give no hint of the genuine uncertainty as to Walpole's intentions that divided his readers from the moment of the book's appearance. One of his earliest and least sympathetic reviewers wrote: 'Whether the author speaks seriously or ironically, we neither know nor care'. Even Walpole himself seems to have been in two minds: to some correspondents he wrote of his serious literary intentions 'to blend the marvellous of old story with the natural of modern novels'; to others, he treated the book as a 'plaisanterie' - 'if I make you laugh ... I shall be content'. To a twentieth-century reader at least, there seems to be a remarkable similarity between the manner and tone of *The Castle of Otranto* and that of Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances.*

A comparable uncertainty can be seen in the critical history of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrête.* Eugene Vinaver took the story at its own apparent valuation when he wrote of Lancelot's 'devotion to a sublime duty, his infinite sense of sacrifice', and his entering the cart as 'the most exalted symbol of twelfth-century *courtoisie*'.[11] But he also pointed out that even before the end of the medieval period, other authors, retelling Chretien's story, must have found its values unintelligible, for they discarded the symbolic power of Lancelot's acts of devotion in favour of other, more prosaic, less demanding accounts of his motivation. Little wonder then, if modern readers find the sublimity of Lancelot's love excessive and ridiculous, and perhaps naturally assume that a writer of Chretien's subtlety and sophistication could only have written in such a way for an ironic and critical purpose: D.D.R. Owen believes 'Chretien is illustrating the exaggerations to which a wrongly based love can lead'[12] and A.H. Diverres that 'the very extravagance of the hyperbole and comparisons suggest ... criticism'.[13]

This is an extreme example, perhaps, but it may help to explain the strange fact that even an appreciative modern scholar retelling an incident of romance to make a serious critical point sometimes, as if involuntarily, renders humorously a passage which in the original was without humour. Is it a sub-conscious sign of the ultimately unknowable otherness of these ancient texts and of those who produced and received them? An example of the phenomenon I mean can be found in a discussion by John Stevens of Marie de France's lay of *Guigemar*. First the incident as translated literally by Jessie Weston:

> Calling three of his men, the baron went suddenly to the chamber ... and when he found Guigemar within, in his great fury told them to slay him. Guigemar rose to his feet, no whit adread. He siezed in both hands a great beam of pine, on which clothes usually hung - so awaited them, thinking ... to cripple them, every man, ere they could approach him.[14]

This is the abridged version as retold by Stevens: 'When attacked by her husband, Guigemar ably defends himself with a handy clothes-horse'.[15] This conjures up a totally different mental picture of the scene, but there is nothing otherwise to suggest that Stevens is taking Marie de France's story any less seriously than Jessie Weston did. Another comparison, even more interestingly, can be made between two retellings of a story by the same critic. Stevens is discussing Chrétien's *Perceval*, and here summarizes the prelude to an important incident:

> Perceval has been adventuring for some time. In an early episode of his story he had wrongly, almost callously, left his old mother, in a faint, and ridden off to become a knight. Now, a proven knight but repentant, he is on his way back to find her. (p.96)

The moral significance of the episode is made clear. But later in the book, when retelling the same story, Stevens seems to give an entirely different impression of the original:

> After his long *aventure* at Biaupaire ... Perceval announces his intention of going home to see his old mother, whom he

> had left swooning on a bridge as he rode off to become a knight. (p.144)

It is not just the absence of the author's overt criticism, but the modern language seems to carry humorous overtones which suggest that there is something comically discrepant about a victorious knight of romance 'going home to see his old mother', and something ridiculous about her, frozen in an almost burlesque romantic attitude, 'left swooning on a bridge'.

Another critic, Jean Frappier, also writing on Chrétien's *Perceval*, produces a quite different comic effect in his own 'brief sketch' of the poem:

> As [Gauvain] approaches the Castle of Cavalon he meets the new king out hunting, who recommends him to the hospitality of his sister. This takes the agreeable form of an ardent wooing, but is interrupted by an attack by the townsfolk.[16]

Here we can recognise the urbanely ironic tone perfected by Ellis a hundred and fifty years before, and which one encounters surprisingly often in the work of modern medievalists, sometimes side by side with comically misplaced modern colloquial phrases. This seems particularly to be the case in works which are making a wide-ranging survey of the field, such as Taylor's and Loomis's (to which I have already referred), and the more recent volume by J.A.W. Bennett on *Middle English Literature*.[17] Bennett is holding up for admiration the romances of *Ywain* and *Gawain and The Awntyrs of Arthur;* yet he retells crucial incidents of the narrative with marked irony. The love between Ywain and Alundyne is presented as follows:

> Ywain, glimpsing his widow, promptly falls in love. Lunet sees at once what the trouble is and prepares Alundyne, her mistress, who is unexpectedly amenable, and becomes Ywain's wife. (p.174)

The adverbs 'promptly' and 'unexpectedly' invite us to smile knowingly at the unrealistically simple portrayal of human behaviour and psychology; and the banal phrase 'what the trouble is' rather

undermines any pretension to refinement in the medieval text's treatment of Ywain's love.

The decisive challenge posed to the justice of Arthur's court by Sir Galeron in the *Awntyrs* is similarly ironized:

> He is Sir Galeron of Galloway, looking for someone to fight, and claiming that Arthur has wrongly given away his lands to Gawain. Gawain with unruffled courtesy leads him to a bedroom fitted up in the latest style, while Arthur takes counsel as to who should answer this challenge. (p.180)

We all know, of course, that Gawain is a byword for courtesy in medieval English romance, but somehow the cliché that Bennett uses trivializes this important fact; and the modernized description of the 'pauelun ... prudlyche i-py†te' as a 'bedroom fitted up in the latest style' is an unforgivable intrusion of the most common-place advertising speak. If this was done intentionally, presumably it was to render the distant unfamiliarity of a romance of chivalry told in the alliterative style more accessible to modern, non-specialist readers.

Modern critics do sometimes deliberately retell stories from romances with a humorous colouring when they are using them in order to make a particular point. William Matthews, for instance, writing on the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, argues that 'the Arthur of the poem [displays] a sardonic humor ... at moments of triumph' and cites as his chief example the incident in which Arthur cuts down the giant Golapas (ll.2123-28). Matthews illustrates his point by a comparison with the medieval Alexander:

> The Golapas episode ... is similar in spirit to one of the most famous incidents in the Alexander legend. Nectanabus, Alexander's magician father, had been gazing on the stars, and had assured his curious offspring of his power to foretell his own fate. Thereupon the youngster shoved him into the city moat, broke his neck, and taunted him with the earthbound inadequacy of his learning.[18]

Needless to say, the original Latin text does not accentuate the humour of the story as Matthews does here, using an aptly wrought epithet for Alexander in one breath ('his curious offspring') and a comical colloquialism in the next ('the youngster shoved him into the moat').

The same poem, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is used by R.W.V. Elliott to make a point in his discussion of the use of topography and landscape in a group of Arthurian romances:

> As for incongruity, there is a good instance in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The king prepares to fight the giant of St. Michael's Mount, whose depredations have been sufficiently rehearsed to whet the audience's appetite for a thoroughly good fight. Arthur's arming... heightens the tension. He sets off ... and one expects him to plunge forthwith like Sidonius Apollinaris into a wilderness of rocks and cliffs, bare, desolate, forbidding, to meet his man - or rather his giant. Instead, the poet makes us skip across as pretty a daisy-meadow as ever graced a medieval vision of Dan Cupid.[19]

The author has made his point here quite amusingly, using the well-tried device of good-humoured irony, with his contrasting pair of literary allusions creating a ludicrously ill-matched couple of figures in the landscape in the reader's imagination, and very effectively emphasizing the incongruity he means to display. However, incongruous though it may be, the effect in the original poem is not comic in this way.

A less obtrusive manipulation of the character of the original text occurs in Muriel Whitaker's humorous retelling of an episode from Malory's Tale of Sir Tristram, to demonstrate the point that the narrative proceeds by a 'proliferation of adventures', beginning here with the evil custom of the castle of Sir Brewnor, which dictates that every knight arriving at the castle must submit his lady to a comparison between her beauty and that of Sir Brewnor's wife, the loser to be beheaded. The author carries on:

> Predictably [La Beale Isode] is judged ... to be the winner and Tristram loses no time in decapitating Brewnor's wife with a backhand stroke ... Tristram lives in the castle for a while 'to 'fordo that foule custom'. And who should turn up but Sir Brewnor's son, Galahalt the High Prince, who has come to avenge the death of his parents.[20]

As has been seen before, the ironic adverb 'predictably' conveys to the reader the inevitable argument that the plot of the romance is naively

and obviously conventional, a message which in this case is heavily underscored by the author's archly comical question 'And who should turn up ... ?'. The clear implication is that Malory's 'proliferation of adventures' in this Tale is not altogether successful, and the manner of retelling has reinforced the point.

Once we are on the firm ground of openly criticizing the structure and style of allegedly inferior romances there is no doubt as to the intent of the critic. Dorothy Everett, for example, ridicules the Middle English romance of *Lybeaus Desconus*, which she characterizes as a 'heaping together of adventures ... by so undiscriminating a hand that the story has little coherence', and asks: 'Who could be moved by three giants, two magicians, one sorceress, a magic hall, and an enchanted lady all in the course of one fairly short story?'.[21] Sir Walter Scott, however, thought that our ancestors would have thrilled and wondered at such marvels; and Bishop Percy believed that 'the fable of this ancient piece ... is as regular in its conduct, as any of the finest poems of classical antiquity'. Even he, though, was forced to admit that 'the execution, particularly as to the diction and sentiments', was regrettably unequal to the plan.[22]

J.A.W. Bennett pokes fun at some failures in execution in his account of *Libeaus Desconus*, which he describes as the work of 'a journeyman *remanieur*': 'romance going downhill' (pp.167-69). His retelling of the story makes it sound like a summary of Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas - and presumably this is what was intended. The familiar combination of arch tone with comic colloquialisms provides his humorous devices, and fights and affairs of love his chief targets:

> [Libeaus] rides off with the dwarf and Ellen (who is still in a foul temper), and they come to a ford guarded, as is *de rigeur* in Arthurian romance, by a formidable knight whom Libeaus soon unhorses. They hack away on foot till the knight pleads for mercy and is sent off to Arthur.
>
> The giant has no sense of fair play and, while Libeaus is taking a drink in his helm, knocks him into the river ... Off comes the giant's head.
>
> In gratitude [Violet's father] predictably offers to Libeaus Violet, a cluster of castles, and succession to his kingdom. But Libeaus is not ready to settle down.

No doubt *Libeaus Desconus* is not the most successful and sophisticated of romances, but it is salutary to remember that pretty well any romance can be made to sound more or less like this if it is retold without sympathy for the conventional nature of medieval romance narrative techniques. This point is well made by a fortuitous comparison offered by two recent critics writing on the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*. Susan Wittig quotes a stanza of the poem in which Belisaunt declares her love to Amis:

> 'Thou art', sche seyd, 'a gentil knight
> And icham a bird in bour bright,
> Of wel heighe kin ycorn,
> And bothe bi day and bi night,
> Mine hert so hard is on the light,
> Mi ioie is al forlorn;
> Plight me thi trewthe thou schalt be trewe
> And chaunge me for no newe
> That in this world is born,
> And y plight the mi treuthe also,
> Til god and deth dele ous ato,
> Y schal neuer be forsworn'. (11.577-88)

'These lines', Susan Wittig writes, 'typical of the diction and prosodic patterns of most of the romances, would call down from Chaucer only the tongue-in-cheek wrath of the parodist', and she argues that the style of the Middle English romances cannot be described or analysed by conventional literary critical methods.[23] I think she overstates the case: the passage is quite a good example of a simple and practical feminine avowal of love, in a style which shares much with contemporary lyrics, and shows effective use of verbal patterning and stress variation. Carol Fewster quotes the same stanza, but also refers to its context and meaning in a way that tries to make sense of its typically 'redundant' style: '[Belisaunt's] speech recapitulates the conventions of and pre-conditions of love in romance'; and also, only twenty lines later, 'the narrator uses of her exactly the same descriptive language as she uses of herself', so that 'the Middle English *Amis* makes this wooing scene work in romance terms, by using and re-using the romance language quoted above'.[24].The same argument can, of course, be applied to other typical romance events. It is all too easy to ridicule the typically redundant style of Middle English romance

narration, rather than to try to explain its purpose, and to satirize the conventionality of the most typical scenes of romance, rather than to attempt to understand, for example, the appeal of those descriptions of battles which notoriously, to quote Muriel Whitaker, 'fail to engage the interest of the modern reader' with their 'catalogues of participants', and encounters in which 'with monotonous regularity knights smite their opponents' (p.39).

Modern story-tellers who are recasting the Arthurian legends for the twentieth century can overcome these difficulties by omitting or abbreviating whatever is judged too protracted for modern taste, and conversely, by extending episodes in which the medieval text does not supply enough detail to satisfy the demands of a reading public raised on a diet of novels. An interesting comparison can be made between Malory's *Morte Darthur* and a twentieth-century retelling. For a brief example one might consider the episode of the boy Arthur's drawing the sword from the stone. This is Malory:

> As they rode to the justesward Sir Kay had lost his swerd, for he had left it at his faders lodgyng, and so he pray'd yong Arthur for to ryde for his swerd. 'I wyll well', said Arthur, and rode faste after the swerd. And when he came home the lady and al were out to see the joustyng. Thenne was Arthur wroth and saide to hymself, 'I will ryde to the chircheyard and take the swerd with me that stycketh in the stone, for my broder Sir Kay shal not be without a swerd this day'.[25]

This is the same passage as retold by Roger Lancelyn Green:

> Riding to the jouste, Sir Kay found suddenly that he had left his sword in his lodging, and he asked Arthur to ride back and fetch it for him. 'Certainly I will', said Arthur, who was always ready to do anything for other people, and back he rode to the town. But Sir Kay's mother had locked the door, and gone out to see the tournament, so that Arthur could not get in at all. This troubled Arthur very much. 'My brother Kay must have a sword', he thought as he rode slowly back. 'It will be a shame and a matter for unkind jests if so young a knight comes to the jousts without a sword. But where can I find him one? - I know! I saw one sticking in an anvil in the churchyard, I'll fetch that: it's doing no good there!'[26]

The *Times Literary Supplement* recommended this modernization for having made 'no attempt to bring the language up to date', and as far as this refers to the general effect of dignity and restraint, it is justified. But Malory's story surely has been brought up to date by the author's wholesale *amplificatio*, which has added half as much again to the length of the original text here. Little details are introduced to improve the narrative continuity of the story: Kay 'suddenly' missed his sword; 'Kay's mother had locked the door ... so that Arthur could not get in at all'. Most obvious is the interior monologue in which a convincing train of thought is supplied to connect Arthur's concern for his brother's predicament with the sword in the stone, and the author even adds sufficient time for these thoughts to go through his head: 'as he rode slowly back'. Arthur is made to appear thoughtful and sympathetic, and to show common-sense and initiative: ideal qualities for a modern boy-hero, and emphasized by the narrator's interpreting his motivation for us: he 'was always ready to do anything for other people'.

All this new, individualizing material hangs upon a significant change: where Malory's Arthur was 'wroth' and acted precipitately in taking the sword, Roger Lancelyn Green's Arthur is 'troubled very much', and agonizes for some time over the problem before reaching his sensible solution. The net effect is to translate the events into modern terms. What we have lost is the sense that Arthur is acting out his destiny, moved to take the sword by the imperative of the narrated story, in which his proper, knightly emotion (wrath) issues instinctively in the correct action. Instead we are given a novelized version of the story, a modern rather than a medieval narrative.

The substitution of a modern for a medieval frame of reference in a book of stories 'newly retold out of the old romances' is understandable - only the latest in a centuries-long series of renovations of the Arthurian legends for new readers with different needs. But when a critic of medieval literature offers a reading of original texts that seems to do the same it is worth asking why. A prime example is Margaret Schlauch's study of medieval narrative in a book which probably declares the answer to the question in its title: *Antecedents of the English Novell*.[27]

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* gives Margaret Schlauch her best example of that 'certain ironical detachment', that 'dual attitude towards the pretensions of chivalry' which distinguish the values 'essential to

the modern novel' from those of medieval romance. Writing on Malory's 'Tale of Sir Gareth', she discerns this 'dual attitude' in the fact that although 'the main interest may still lie in external chivalric adventures carried out in an unreal world, ... Malory does occasionally suggest a query about the motives which actuate his people - hence an implied critique of courtly love. The critique may not always have been consciously intended, but there it is, visible at least to the modern reader'. The last sentence here must give one pause. The episode which is immediately retold to illustrate the visibility of the critique of chivalric values in Malory's narrative is the encounter between Sir Gareth and the Red Knight:

> A certain Red Knight, guilty of hanging forty-odd opponents in his warfare against King Arthur's knights, is finally defeated by Sir Gareth; he then explains that he had been prompted to his unmannerly feud by love of a fair lady. This gallant excuse causes Sir Gareth to spare his life ... The pretext seems so inadequate in view of the heinous deeds ... that it is difficult not to suspect a dash of satire here. (p.75)

It is clear that the alleged ironic attitude implicit in this incident is entirely the product of the author's heavily abbreviated, somewhat whimsical retelling, and her overt interpretation of its significance. By omitting any mention of the 'many Erles, Barons and noble knyghts' who interceded with Sir Gareth on behalf of the Red Knight in the name of mercy and amendment, the effect of the episode is wholly altered, and its contribution to the meaning of the Tale as a whole is lost. The 'modern reader' has redirected Malory's story so as to create a completely new and different text: one which is more amenable to her purposes.

A little later on she discusses Malory's setting forth of the situation between Sir Gareth and his lady 'in terms of familiar, predictable human motives' after the manner of modern fiction. Again, however, we find that these novelistic tendencies are present not in Malory's text but in the author's retold and reinterpreted version.

> [He] loves her and is hotly loved in return. The two are properly betrothed, but the lady, eager to anticipate the pleasures of marriage, proposes a nocturnal visit to Gareth's bed. Her sister learns of the plan, however, and undertakes to

> foil it. Presumably she acts in the interests of family honour, but actually (one can not help surmising) she is prompted by feminine pique. It was she, after all, who had conducted Gareth on his dangerous quest to rescue her sister and had learned to respect his prowess after first doubting and even scorning it. (p.77)

The account of the two lovers here betrays the author's lack of sympathy in its slightly arch tone: they are interesting only in their somewhat unconventional directness. It is the overlooked sister who is obviously felt to be the real heroine, and while the summary of her growing respect for Gareth in Malory's Tale is fairly accurate, the rest of her story is rewritten in the light of the author's presumptions and surmises as to what was 'actually' going on in her private emotional life. Roger Lancelyn Green evidently felt a similar dissatisfaction with Malory's handling of this triangular relationship, and in his retold version of the Tale of Sir Gareth he had the freedom to project into an alternative fiction what can only be hinted at in a scholarly retelling. In his story it is the faithful Linnet who marries the young hero. Both the adaptations of the story-teller and the retellings and surmises of the critic attempt to transform elements of the text that perhaps seem alien and uninterpretable into something more recognizable and productive.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight meets many of Margaret Schlauch's requirements for novelistic excellence: sophisticated manners, striking descriptions, subtle presentation of emotions. Nevertheless, the author's summary of the story (pp.23-28) does not always support her favourable view. It begins: 'Here is the situation. Sir Gawain, model knight of King Arthur's court, has got himself involved in a test of bravery'. At once the chatty, colloquial style invites the reader to share a patronizing, stereotyped view of the hero, who is made to sound more than a little foolish. After relating straightforwardly the Green Knight's challenge and Gawain's blow, the author comments:

> A fine predicament, this, for any conscientious knight! On the one hand, his word has been given and he must abide by it, according to the chivalric code he follows; but on the other hand it is obvious that his opponent is something more than human - for what ordinary mortal could elevate his severed pate and cause it to speak? Cephalophoric saints like Denis of

> France might have done so, but this is no hagiographical situation.

What is one to make of the tone of this passage? The humorous irony of the opening exclamation, the comic choice of the word 'pate', and the extravagant display of polysyllabic learning in the final comparative aside, all apparently undermine the seriousness of the moral analysis being conducted here. It seems that the novelizing approach simply cannot cope with the un-novelistic qualities of medieval romance without resorting inevitably to humorous condescension. The author is happier with the scenes in the castle in *Sir Gawain* , in which she discusses without jokes the 'transcription of natural colloquies carried on in specifically realized settings', except that even here she refers somewhat archly to 'our embarrassed hero' and 'our medieval heroine' - epithets that speak volumes about the gulf between medieval romance and the modern novel.

Terence McCarthy expresses the unsatisfied needs felt by the modern reader of medieval romance when he writes of Malory: 'There are, we feel 'private' worlds which he leaves unexplained. We wish to translate the scenes into modern terms and give them the fullness of the novelistic technique'; and he shows how such translations are likely to 'produce interpretations ... for the sort of world we inhabit and are used to reading about, not ... for the court of King Arthur'.[28] But sensitive as he is to this danger, he is not immune to the irruption of anachronistic humour into his own abbreviated retellings of Malory, as can be seen in his account of Lancelot's encounter with Sir Pedyvere:

> "Lancelot saves a lady from the wrath of a husband out to behead her, {but} he only manages to delay the husband's fury. The knight tricks him and the lady has her head lopped off while Lancelot is looking away.' (p.159)

The heavy alliteration adds to the ridiculous effect of the speeded-up action, but there is no indication that the author intends to be humorous, and unlike the comic touches in Margaret Schlauch's retellings the humour here adds nothing to his critical argument. It is another example of that apparently involuntary humour that seems to signal a deep-seated uncomfortableness felt by modern readers of

romance, no matter how learned or how well-intentioned towards the literature of the distant past.

Perhaps the critical fashion for admiring irony that has been so influential in this century has affected our ability to respond simply and unselfconsciously to a narrative mode which is as markedly free of irony as romance. At least it may have made us anxiously uncertain of the response of those to whom we seek to commend the romances, so that the intrusive humour could be likened to the nervously ingratiating smile of embarrassment with which we might introduce an untried new idea to a potentially critical audience. Particularly when we find ourselves falling into a jocular manner while summarizing romances for students, it may be that we are unconsciously trying to reassure them, to make the romances seem less obscure and inaccessible, to convince the students that we are on their side, as it were. But in the process of becoming salesmen for medieval literature perhaps we are betraying its integrity.

Nineteenth-century writers, confident in their view of the superiority of modern fiction, deliberately adopted a humorous, condescending manner towards the extravagant and quaint features of old romances, while at the same time assimilating what was thought admirable and of enduring appeal by retelling it in the style of a contemporary romantic novel - a style which now, in its turn, sometimes has humorous overtones to our ears. Perhaps the uncertainty which seems to be signalled by the involuntary humour I have been pointing out in the work of some twentieth-century critics is as much a sign of our times as the self-confidence of nineteenth-century scholars was of theirs.

NOTES

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5 Muriel Whitaker, *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure* (Cambridge 1984), p. 39.

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7 *Romances of Chivalry* (London 1887). p. vi.

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