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## THEMATIC STRUCTURE AND SYMBOLIC MOTIF IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH BRETON LAYS

By SHEARLE FURNISH

The Breton Lays in Middle English is an enigmatic label customarily used to designate eight or nine brief narratives: *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine*, "The Franklin's Tale," *Sir Launfal*, *The Earl of Toulouse*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Gowther*.<sup>1</sup> The label is awkward because it may seem to suggest that the poems are consistently derived from or inspired by Breton or Old French sources and thus are a sort of stepchildren, little more than translations or, worse, misunderstandings of a multi-media heritage.<sup>2</sup> Most scholars have seen the grouping as traditional and artificial, passed along in.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London, 1954); *Sir Degaré* in *Medieval English Romances*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt and Nicholas Jacobs (New York, 1980), 2:57–88; *Lay le Freine* in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, 1995), 68–87; *Sir Launfal*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London, 1960); *The Earl of Toulouse*, in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale (New York, 1930), 383–419; *Emaré*, ed. French and Hale, *Middle English Metrical Romances*, 423–55; *Sir Gowther*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, *Middle English Breton Lays*, 274–95; and "The Franklin's Tale" in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), 178–89. Quotations from these works are identified by line numbers. For convenience, I do not include in this study a major source of Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, a poem entitled *Landevale*. Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury add *Sir Cleges* to the contents of their anthology "based upon common topoi that render it compatible with the Middle English Breton Lays" but seem hesitant to call it a lay explicitly, except by its inclusion (Laskaya and Salisbury, *Middle English Breton Lays*, vii). In explaining their exclusion of Chaucer's contributions to the genre, Laskaya and Salisbury observe that the "Wife of Bath's Tale" is also widely recognized as a Breton Lay. Although currently engaged in examining it as a lay for another study, I exclude the "Wife's Tale" here only because she does not make the point of its genre as the Franklin does.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., A. C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 117–56. Among other underestimations of the English tradition arising from the assumption that the English versions should be seen solely or mostly as translations, Spearing (*ibid.*, 118) writes of *Sir Launfal*, "Chestre destroys the meaning of *Lanval* precisely by identifying totally with the very fantasies it represents." For an opposing view of Chestre's artistry, see my "Civilization and Savagery in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," *Medieval Perspectives* 3 (1988): 137–49. Constance Bullock-Davies clarifies the famous semantic confusions surrounding the term *lai* and describes the various features that might have gone into the ancient performances originally called *lais*, already obsolete when Marie wrote. See eadem, "The Form of the Breton Lay," *Medium Ævum* 42 (1973): 18–31. Clearly, from Marie onward, the most that poets could have accurately meant by associating their compositions with the term *lai* is the literary residue or poetically commemorated *aventure* that in earlier times may have been just one, and not the most important, feature of the performance. I use the term in this sense. Like my study, Bullock-

uncritical reception, not resting on substantial generic similarities that distinguish the poems from other literary forms. John Finlayson, for instance, concludes, "In fact, considered coldly, shortness and adventure or ordeal would seem to be the only things that can really be isolated as universal characteristics."<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have accounted for the poems as a set. The distinctions they discuss commonly include the lays' close relation to the conventions of the folk-tale, relationship to provincial audiences, and a growing sophistication of the craft of fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, however, there has been no decisive view of the lay as an integrated form within Middle English romance in general, and most commentators would say that this is because such a view is not supportable.<sup>5</sup> Most of the familiar distinctions of the lay, for instance, are incidental. The relationship of the Middle English lays to ancient bardic performance, a feature no more evident in most of them than in those of Marie de France, does not make the lays a separate category any more than their common formulas of popular oral performance, which are manifestly unlike Marie's urbane narration; nor do the elements of Celtic fairy lore. The lays do not entirely exclude Arthurian material or embrace it regularly, do not share a common metrical system, do not uniformly develop courtly themes, and are not all contemporaneous.

Among the influential attempts to deal with the generic term and the poems as a tradition are Kathryn Hume's identification of some elements in the form<sup>6</sup> and Laura H. Loomis's argument that the prologue of "The Franklin's Tale" may have begun the process of cementing them all as a genre, reflecting back as it does on the prologue of *Lay le Freine* in the

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Davies's also emphasizes the crucial function of technical form in the distinction of the genre.

<sup>3</sup> John Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English Lay," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1985): 354.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., respectively, G. V. Smithers, "Story-Patterns in Some Breton Lays," *Medium Ævum* 22 (1953): 61-92; A. J. Bliss, ed., *Sir Launfal* (London, 1960), 22-23, 31-33; Piero Boitani, *English Medieval Narrative in the 13th and 14th Centuries*, trans. Joan K. Hall (Cambridge, 1982), 54-59.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Strohm, "The Origins and Meaning of Middle English *Romaunce*," *Genre* 10 (1977): 1-28, at 24. Noting that "one or more *lais* invariably offer exceptions to the strongest arguments for the cohesiveness of the group," Strohm concludes "that the term *lai* did not originate from any clear necessity" and that "the adoption of the term by writers other than Marie was based not on their special need for a new term to describe their works" (here *ibid.*, 24-25). Finlayson ("Form," 366-67) concludes, "The *lay* in Middle English . . . is not a uniform sub-type of romance, distinguishable by a manner of treatment and by particular combinations of motifs. It is a short narrative poem, characterized by a concentration on simplicity of action, and divisible into two essentially different types."

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the *Franklin's Tale* a Breton *Lai*," *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 365-79.

Auchinleck MS (Advocates Library, Edinburgh, MS 19. 2. 1. no. 155), where Chaucer found nine formal elements announced explicitly.<sup>7</sup> Neither Hume nor Loomis, however, accounts for all the poems commonly considered under the term, and neither establishes any formal quality that is unique to the lay.<sup>8</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan's comprehensive survey, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties*, argues, as the subtitle suggests, for the diversity and inconsistency of the group, as do John Beston, Paul Strohm, and Finlayson.<sup>9</sup> Most critics of the Breton lays in Middle English assert that little more than a peculiar combination of conventions and authorial ambitions demarcates this small subset of brief romances.

Two more recent assessments, however, distinguish the Breton lay in Middle English as a body unified by shared themes and specific attitudes toward romance conventions. Thomas A. Shippey recognizes in the plot of Breton lays what Derek Brewer calls the "family drama" or "the basic human experience of growing up."<sup>10</sup> Although Shippey is most concerned with Marie's poems, he sees the central concern with family drama extended into both the anonymous French lays and the Middle English.<sup>11</sup> David Harrington correctly dismisses the traditional features by which the Breton lay in Middle English is defined as a genre but argues its generic integrity all the same. Eschewing formal criteria, Harrington proposes "to justify the English lays because of social and ethical values that distinguish them in important ways from other narratives of their time." Particularly, Harrington notices in the Breton lays the relative lack of emphasis on martial prowess, the greater attention to the hero's domestic and social contexts, and the way "that major characters . . . create a mutually satisfying relationship with the ones dearest to them."<sup>12</sup> He concludes by characterizing the Breton lays in Middle English as "speculative models of how men and women might

<sup>7</sup> Laura H. Loomis, "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 14–33.

<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced correction of Hume and Loomis, see Angela M. Lucas, "Keeping up Appearances: Chaucer's Franklin and the Magic of the Breton Lay Genre," *Literature and the Supernatural*, ed. Brian Cosgrove (Dublin, 1996), 11–32, esp. 11–19.

<sup>9</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, 1969); John B. Beston, "How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?" *The Learned and the Lewed*, ed. Larry D. Benson, *Harvard English Studies* 5 (Cambridge, 1974) 319–36; Strohm, "Origins and Meaning," 24–25; and Finlayson, "Form," 353–54.

<sup>10</sup> T. A. Shippey, "Breton Lais and Modern Fantasies," in *Studies in Medieval English Romances*, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge, 1988), 69; see also Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1980), 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> Shippey, "Breton Lais," 83.

<sup>12</sup> David Harrington, "Redefining the Middle English Breton Lay," *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 16 (1988): 73–95, at 74.

live and love together.”<sup>13</sup> For different reasons, Shippey and Harrington leave the formal nature of the genre unexamined.

My purpose is to show that the poems in the English tradition share a distinctive structure and design, a rhythmical measurement of balanced episodes by recurring symbolic objects, assembled into a cyclic, mythopoeic pattern analogous to the revolution of Fortune’s wheel, as Rosemary Woolf once suggested in passing.<sup>14</sup> Readers attentive to narrative structure will notice a regular, symmetrical repetition or sequence of concrete symbols (the famous examples are Orfeo’s harp and Dorigen’s “grisly rokkes blake” [“Franklin’s Tale,” 859]) that layer or stratify narrative material. Kevin Kiernan calls this feature of romance construction “the rhyme of parallel repetition” and likens its function to the parallel construction in diptych and triptych panels.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, C. A. Robson sees techniques of symmetrical composition in medieval poetry analogous to the “massive formal symmetries of the monumental art of that age. . . .”<sup>16</sup> To follow this regular *conjointure* by regularly recurring symbols is to appreciate the logical and systematic development of narrative episodes — and, moreover, to define the lay’s form and discover the distinctive romantic rhetoric this small genre invests in the commonplace devices of adventure. Analysis of narrative technique proves Strohm correct in his general assessment:

What writers subsequent to Marie are telling us when they call their narrative poems *lais* is not that they know or even claim to know anything about Breton originals, but that they wish for their audience to glimpse in their poems something of the precision, something of the restraint, or even simply something of the skill which can be found in Marie’s highly influential body of poems.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., “Redefining,” 93.

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Woolf, “Later Poetry: the Popular Tradition,” *History of Literature in the English Language*, vol. 1 of *The Middle Ages*, ed. W. F. Bolton (London, 1970), 268. Harrington (“Redefining,” 82) also notes Woolf’s observation and its implications for an understanding of the relationship between form and meaning in the lay.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Kiernan, “*Athelston* and the Rhyme of the English Romances,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 36 (1975): 353, 347–51. Both Kiernan’s attention to parallel structure and mine to symmetrical, thematic repetition of symbolic objects are reminiscent of Vladimir Propp’s assertion that, as opposed to study of broad narrative types, “study according to small component parts is the correct method of investigation.” See Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, ed. with introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, Bibliographical and Special Series 9 (Philadelphia, 1958), 10.

<sup>16</sup> C. A. Robson, “The Technique of Symmetrical Composition in Medieval Narrative Poetry,” *Studies in Medieval French Presented to Alfred Ewert in Honour of His Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford, 1961), 26–75, at 27.

<sup>17</sup> Strohm, “Origins and Meaning” (n. 5 above), 25.

As other critics have regretted, poets who call their works lays reveal very little, in those passages where they claim that heritage, about what a lay is. Harrington states the case aptly: "Calling one's work a Breton lay may be something like calling Milton's 'When I consider how my light is spent' an Italian sonnet."<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the exact meaning of the term *Breton lai* — whether it is the late medieval poets, modern scholars, or neither, who misunderstand the historical sense of the term — an analysis of narrative structure shows that in fact a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century English poet could have known exactly the design implied and narrative techniques entailed in a poem of that tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Marie's *lais*, the French tradition more broadly, or Celtic folk tradition may after all be the original source or inspiration of the structural practices I will outline, but it cannot be clear without further study whether the coherent generic character of the lays in Middle English should be traced to Marie or rather ascribed to some seminal English text such as the Auchinleck MS. It is sufficient for now to establish that such a coherent English tradition does in fact exist.

#### THE CONJOINTURE OF THE AUCHINLECK MS LAYS

Early in the development of the English tradition come the three lays collected in the Auchinleck MS: *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Lay le Freine*. Each develops in episodic narratives, the episodes in turn relating a single, elaborate trial or adventure. *Sir Orfeo* suffers the intrusion of the fairy king in his realm and his home, loses his wife Heurodis and thus his first test of strength, and then exiles himself to the wilderness, from which he emerges after many trials of privation and perception, apparently worthy to vie again for his lady. In the enchanted world, Orfeo pits himself against the other king a second time and this time wins. Although these trials find him whole again in himself and in his marriage, he next must reclaim his position as a lord of men. Thus in a final trial Orfeo, once more in his own kingdom, tests his steward and proves simultaneously his own largesse and judgment. Summarized, the episodes in *Sir Orfeo* proceed as follows:

1. fairy intrusion, loss of Heurodis
2. self-exile and suffering in the wilderness
3. adventure in fairyland
4. return to his kingdom, resumption of throne.

<sup>18</sup> Harrington, "Redefining," 77.

<sup>19</sup> As Propp (*Morphology*, 18) promises at the outset of his important study of folktales, "The result will be a morphology (i.e., the description of the folktale according to its component parts and the relationship of these component parts to each other and to the whole)." My claim is similar for the Breton lays in Middle English.

Likewise, Sir Degaré grows in a process of trial; there are six episodes in this longer poem, which also treats its hero's mysterious origins and childhood. Born of a rape, Degaré is abandoned and brought up at a hermitage. Young and unsophisticated like Perceval, Degaré is first tested by a dragon and, when he wins, is worthy of a knight's equipment. By external signs then a man, Degaré journeys onward but soon pits himself unwittingly against his grandfather. Unhorsing him, he wins his own mother. From this budding oedipal theme the poet shifts to other love trials, in which Degaré defeats a cruel rival for the love of a beautiful, besieged lady. Having made preliminary addresses to both oedipal and eclectic sexual experience, Degaré needs to resolve the tension between them.<sup>20</sup> This he accomplishes when, unwittingly, as in the case of his grandfather, he confronts his father in combat, subsequently discovers their kinship, and is able to reunite his parents, thus freeing himself to marry his beloved. Simplified, the scheme of Sir Degaré's adventures proceeds as follows:

1. Degaré's mother raped by a fairy knight
2. Degaré raised in a hermitage
3. battle with dragon, investiture as knight
4. battle with grandfather, marriage to mother
5. battle with cruel rival, rescue of besieged lady
6. battle with father, discovery, double marriage.

At a glance, the poems do not seem very similar. *Sir Orfeo* is about a musician king, not a knight-errant, and develops more thoughtfully than any other lay the fairy material with which these poems are associated as a group. As Finlayson points out, "This poem is frequently regarded as the best of the Middle English lays and the paradigm of what a lay ought to be," whereas, on the other hand, "*Sir Degaré* is in no way substantially different from any other *roman d'aventure*."<sup>21</sup> Harrington, who otherwise defends the integrity of the lay form in Middle English, agrees that *Sir Degaré* is not a lay.<sup>22</sup> Of the eight or nine anonymous poems commonly so classified, *Sir Degaré* is the only one whose narrator does not explicitly call it a lay. Rather, *Sir Degaré*'s claim to identity with others has rested on the setting in Brittany and its association with the other two Auchinleck MS lays. *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, nevertheless, are structurally quite similar. Although in much different degrees, both tales involve the intervention of the fairy. Both narratives account, in recondite ways, for the hero's familial and social relationships, more particularly his obligations to the profession of

<sup>20</sup> Cheryl Colopy, "*Sir Degaré: A Fairy Tale Oedipus*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 17 (1982): 31-39, at 31-32.

<sup>21</sup> Finlayson, "Form," 358, 357.

<sup>22</sup> Harrington, "Redefining," 79-80.

knighthood and to women. Both adapt and make comic an antique and tragic myth. Unlike the Eurydice of the Virgilian version, Heurodis is treated to a preview of her captivity in the underworld, and Orfeo succeeds in restoring her to the world of the living. Similarly, Degaré's timely discovery that he has wed his mother enables him to avoid oedipal disaster. Until then he bears certain resemblances to the Theban king: he is raised in foreign circumstances, proves himself a hero in saving the earl, commits an initial patricide (sublimated as it is in the unhorsing of his grandfather), reenters his native kingdom, takes certain powers, and marries his mother.<sup>23</sup>

The poet of *Sir Degaré* shapes his hero's character by stringing together the crises in Degaré's personal and social maturation. When Degaré begins his quest for identity, like Perceval he first implicitly admits his unreadiness for knighthood by rejecting chivalric arms to choose instead an oak sapling, which both as weapon and as phallic symbol is more primitive than the sword or lance. Degaré then departs immediately through a forest. After he defeats the dragon, like Cinderella's prince he seeks among the local maidens the perfect fit for his mother's glove, an heirloom and token of identity left with him when he was abandoned for fostering. Thus the plot dramatizes his accruing experience, including sexual awakening. Degaré accepts knighthood and travels on to the old king's city where his father's sword and a new sexual crisis mark the next episode's boundaries, after which he begins a new ride through more wilderness. Finally, still more new arms and another steed, won in service to his beloved, send him onward in the final search, again through a forest, for his father. The poet of *Sir Degaré* projects character in cumulative facets, adding to traits set out at the beginning — birth-station, name, and infant circumstances — the incremental growth achieved through adventures.<sup>24</sup> As the author of *Sir Orfeo* uses the harp, the *Sir Degaré* poet unifies his themes with prominent, reiterated symbols, the serial sets of arms, steeds, and forests, recurring in a regular pattern through the episodes. He creates a layered or segmented tale, a poem that enjambes flat and symbolical events in a episodic or strophic presentation to achieve dimension and make narrative and thematic headway.

The case is much the same in *Sir Orfeo*, where distinct episodes are marked by recurrent mention of the harp, appearances of the fairies, subse-

<sup>23</sup> See Bruce A. Rosenberg, "The Three Tales of 'Sir Degaré,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 39–51, at 42–43.

<sup>24</sup> As R. W. Hanning points out, this growth is of a different sort than a character's in modern fiction: "As we respond to the motive clues in a string of episodes, we become increasingly aware of the main issues of the romance; in other words, while there seems no 'development' in the character of the hero, there is development of our awareness as an audience." See "The Audience as Co-Creator of the First Chivalric Romances," *Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 1–28, at 15.



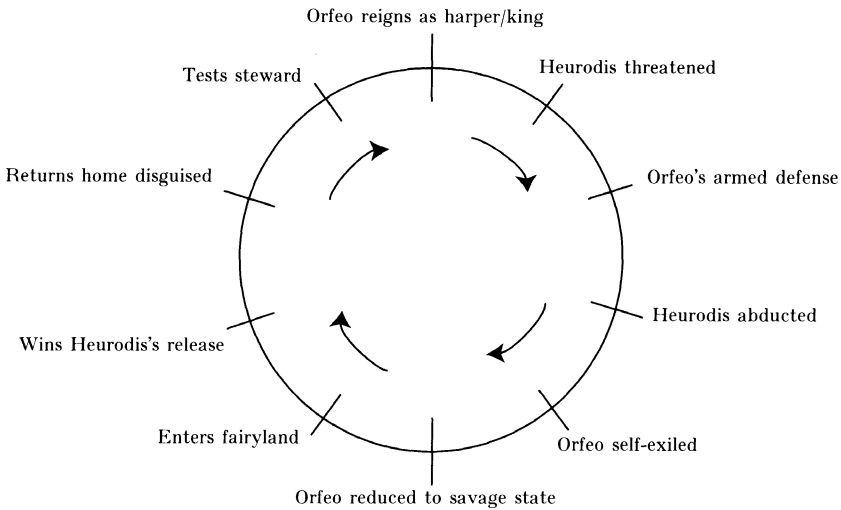
quent crises in which the hero speaks — usually in pledging a vow — and then immediate changes of scene. The development of character through distinctly marked trials creates a rhythm that plays on the hero's fortunes. Sir Orfeo abdicates his throne ostensibly because the fairy king has successfully challenged him, and resumes his throne only after he finally overcomes the fairy king. So growing out of this accumulation of distinct episodes is a meaningful pattern: prowess evolves through trial. From the moment of Orfeo's entry to the fairy world, midway through the episodes of the story, the poet begins essentially anew with the same structure he traced before, conflict with the fairy king over Heurodis, yet raising Orfeo's fortunes from the depths to which he had cast them previously. Kiernan describes the audience's apprehension of such reiteration as "a sense of calculated *déjà vu*," and demonstrates how in the romance *Athelston* it is essentially rhetorical, not merely decorative in effect.<sup>25</sup> Each reiteration of conflict with fairy power depicts the dependence of Orfeo's public power on his personal abilities, and the common link between his misfortunes and his triumphs is Heurodis.

The lay of *Sir Orfeo*, then, has three concentric structural levels. Four episodes, conveying a single trial each, fit neatly by pairs inside two larger conflicts with the fairy.<sup>26</sup> Each sortie against the fairy king depicts a half turn of Fortune's wheel.<sup>27</sup> Adopting the conventional clockwise rotation of her wheel, and commencing at the apex, here is another way to graph the plot of *Sir Orfeo*:

<sup>25</sup> Kiernan, "Athelston," 348.

<sup>26</sup> For the perception of the poem's structure as nesting-box sequences of episodes within larger narrative patterns, I am indebted to D. M. Hill, "The Structure of 'Sir Orfeo,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 136–53. Hill (*ibid.*, 139) sees these structural divisions: "The major assay concerns the testing of Orfeo and Heurodis and through them the quality of human heterosexual (if you like, 'romance') love. The minor assay concerns the testing of the steward and through him the quality of male (epic, and romance) love." For a concise comparison of different views of the structural divisions in *Sir Orfeo*, including her own emphasis on the pattern of loss and restoration to which my view is indebted, see Mary Hynes-Berry, "Cohesion in *King Horn* and *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 50 (1975): 652–70, at 663–64.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957). Describing the analogous relation of romance to innocence and realism to experience, and the relation of all four concepts as quadrants of a wheel, Frye (*ibid.*, 162) remarks: "The downward movement is the tragic movement, the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward hamartia, and from hamartia to catastrophe. The upward movement is the comic movement, from threatening complications to happy ending and a general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after."

*Sortie 1: fairy defeats Orfeo**Sortie 2: Orfeo defeats fairy*

This structure suggests that Heurodis is the hub of Orfeo's life, central to his fortunes.

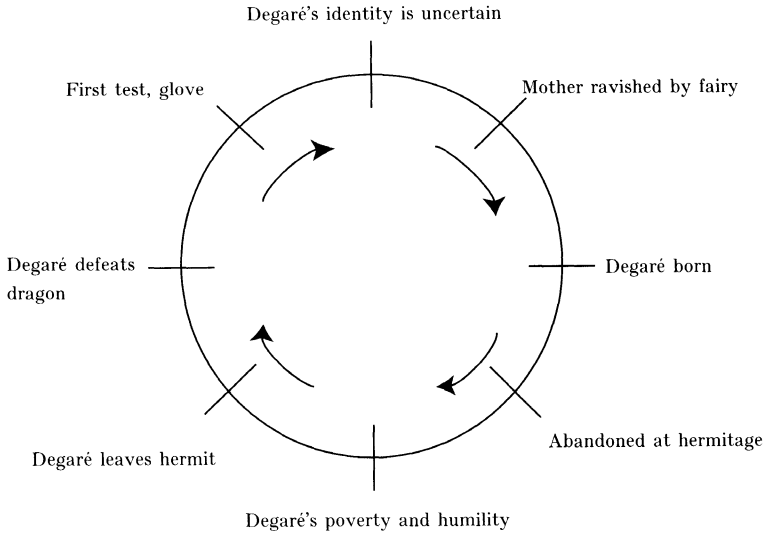
The analogy with *rota fortunae* holds true for *Sir Degaré*, but we must broaden our view of the whole poem to see it. There are two complete revolutions in Degaré's fortunes, one for his youth and one for his knighthood. They pivot on his victory over the dragon and his first encounter with women. The transition from one revolution to the other, the reversal from ascending good fortune to new trials in a quest for identity, comes at the point of a crucial misunderstanding in the hero, a kind of oedipal hubris:

Sire Degaré þous þenche gan:  
 "Ich am a staleworth man, . . .

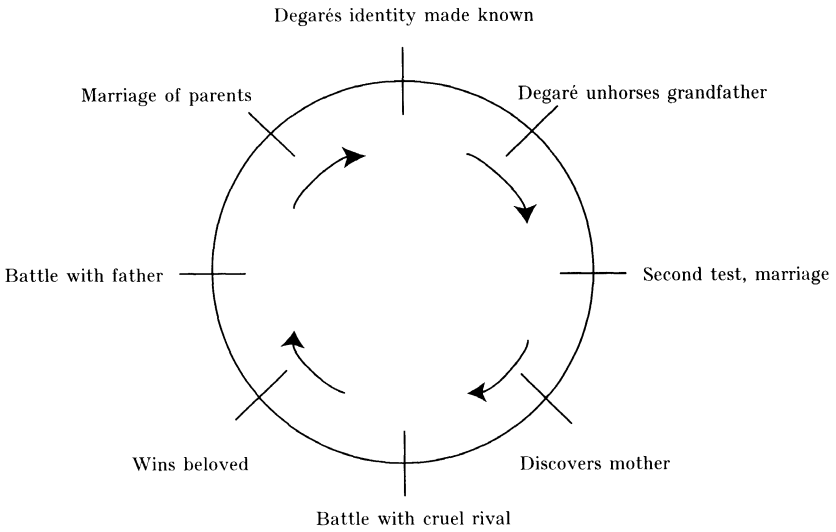
And of min owen ich haue a stede,  
 Swerd and spere and riche wede;  
 And ȝif ich felle þe kyng adoun,  
 Euere ich have wonnen renoun. . . ."  
 (459-66)

Here is a graph of the revolutions in Sir Degaré's fortunes, plotted on the design of *rota fortunae*:

*Cycle 1: birth and childhood*



*Cycle 2: self-discovery and social integration*



In *Lay le Freine*, the shortest lay of the Auchinleck MS, similar episodic boundaries are distinguishable but less graphically reinforced. Le Freine's birth takes place under peculiar circumstances, just as Degaré's, and she is likewise abandoned and raised in a religious environment. Like Degaré's story, le Freine's recounts her discovery of identity and recovery of heritage. As in both other lays, journeys are part of the transition between episodes, and le Freine's ring and mantle correspond archetypically and directly to Degaré's sword and gear. Perhaps intended as such by their poets or by the Auchinleck compiler, *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Degaré* are companion pieces, having almost identical Cinderella themes and structures but concerning the opposite sexes.<sup>28</sup> The major difference is the absence of an obvious antique tragic analogue for *Lay le Freine*, although it seems to me that Marie's original itself has the same relationship to *Lay le Freine* as the Orpheus and Oedipus myths do to *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, as retold legends from an older era and foreign heritage.

The Middle English story is a fairly straightforward translation of Marie's *Lai le Fresne*: abandoned and raised by a holy woman, the girl called le Freine, or ash-tree, attracts attention from the outer world for her beauty and grace.<sup>29</sup> A bachelor knight intrigues to meet her and wins her away from the convent; his court convinces him to marry another, however, and although she is not exiled, le Freine must move aside in Guroun's household. The English version is incomplete because of lacunae in the unique Auchinleck MS version, but in Marie's story the heroine, despite her displacement, proves her unselfish love by spreading her heirloom cloth over the marriage bed. Subsequently, the bride's mother, who is indeed also le Freine's, recognizes the token she sent with le Freine at the time of her abandonment and thus discovers her lost daughter, the twin of Guroun's intended. Le Freine then has established her identity and nobility, and as a consequence Guroun can marry her with his court's blessings. Thus, also, the denouement forestalls a taboo entanglement of sorts, just as does the plot of *Sir Degaré*.

Her ring and mantle recur to mark the stages in the development of her character, just as swords and other gear of chivalry recur in *Sir Degaré*. Compared to the other two poems, *Lay le Freine* lacks overt fairy material, but it does not thereby lack mystery and magic. Like the beauty of many romance heroines, le Freine's becomes famous and widely reported. Guroun is drawn to her by these reports and "comced to love hir anon right" (270).

<sup>28</sup> Beston ("Breton *Lai*," 323) among others, observes ideas and phrases in *Sir Degaré* borrowed from *Lay le Freine*.

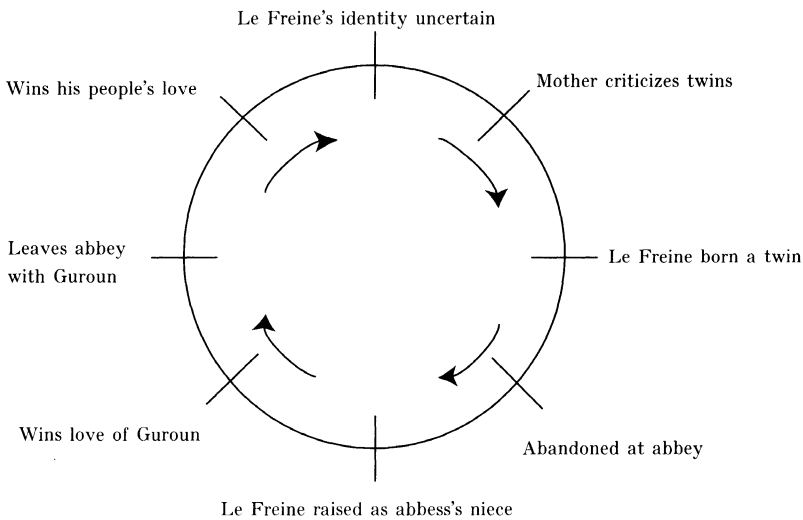
<sup>29</sup> That is, in terms of plot outline, major characterizations, and motivations. For an analysis of the substantial differences in tone, diction, and audience, see Spearing, "Marie de France" (n. 2 above), 126-33.

She follows Guroun to his court because of her love for him, “as sche hadde ben his wedded wiif” (310), but once there:

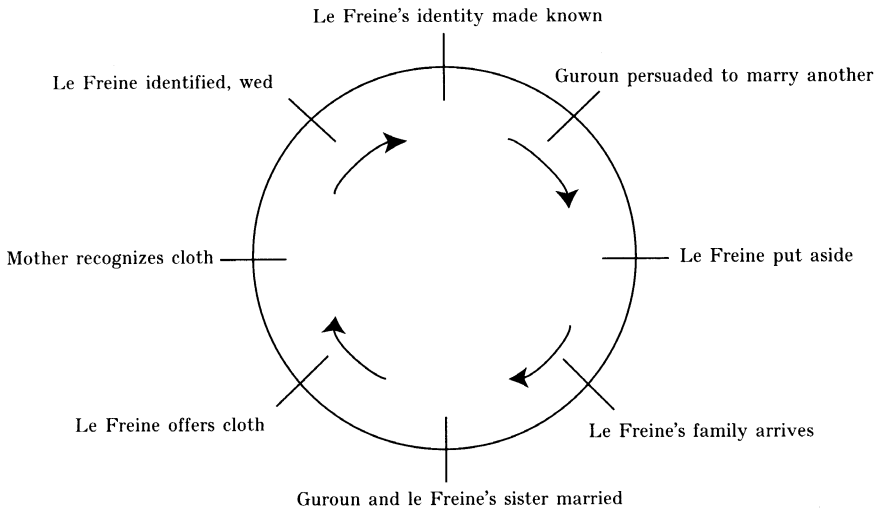
So long sche was in his castel  
 That al his meyné loved hir wel.  
 To riche and pouer sche gan hir dresse,  
 That al hir loved, more and lesse.  
 (305–8)

Through her effect on the abbess, Guroun, his people, and finally her mother, le Freine gradually reveals this power to evoke love. The attraction she exerts on those in her life has about it a lingering hint of the marvelous and reveals gradually the source of its power in her readiness to give love generously. She nurtures a strong erotic and connubial bond to Guroun, and on these bases she grows to love mankind (“his meyné,” “riche and pouer”) and to receive mankind’s love in return, so that ultimately she becomes in deeds and appearance a visible manifestation of love. Consistent with *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine* emphasizes the precedence of personal virtues such as prowess or love, tested and proven in a bond such as cloistered devotion, marriage, family, or feudal office, in the formation of public virtues like gentility or largesse.<sup>30</sup> Here is a graph of the cycles in her formation:

*Cycle 1: birth and childhood*



<sup>30</sup> Hill (“Structure,” 149) observes in *Sir Orfeo* this relationship between private love and social belonging. For a similar view, see Peter J. Lucas, “An Interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*,” *Leeds Studies in English* 6 (1972): 1–9, at 5. Seth Lerer also stresses “patterns of domestication” and “civilizing power” in the poem, but attributes them not to love but to Orfeo’s music; see “Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Speculum* 60 (1985): 92–109, at 105.

*Cycle 2: self-discovery and social integration*

*Lay le Freine* possesses a somewhat more direct connection still with the lore of the fairy. Whereas Degaré's mother abandoned him because he was offspring of her rape by a mysterious stranger, and because she feared her father would be blamed, le Freine is abandoned because she is born one twin to a mother who had once, in her jealousy, called twins a sign of the mother's infidelity. Thus le Freine's mother must rid herself quietly of one newborn in order to avoid the shame of evil gossip or the appearance of having entertained a "bileman" (105), a term that reminds us of the fairy intruder who plays a major role in the other two Auchinleck lays. In *Lay le Freine* (as in Marie's version, of course) the whole narrative strategy of recourse to magical explanations is rationalized in the mother's superstition and jealousy, and the mysterious interloper is emphatically reduced to a figment of her anxiety. But these contrasts only clarify, not invalidate, the relation to *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*. To marvels in ordinary reality are ascribed causes emerging from a variously defined other world. In the other two poems the ascription to the realm of the fairy is literalized, central, and symbolic, whereas in *Lay le Freine*, as in urbane Marie, the ascription of marvels to the bileman is subordinated, ironic, and critical.

The three lays of the Auchinleck MS all dramatize bizarre assaults on central figures, assaults representing threats to marriage, family, or kingdom. Orfeo's queen Heurodis is first threatened with abduction and then

taken (“Wold ich, nold ich,” she reports [154]) by the fairy king. Degaré’s mother is first acquainted with the fairy knight’s intentions and then perfunctorily raped, “Wheþer þe likeþ wel or wo” (106). Le Freine is seduced rather bluntly by the knight who visits her in the convent where she is raised. He declares, “thou most lat be . . . and go with me” (293–94). These lays pose unnerving, sometimes terrifying threats to the twin institutions of *eros* in society: marriage and courtly love. A concern with the manifestations of desire, will, love, and related social bonds like marriage and vassalage is common to these lays,<sup>31</sup> just as in Marie’s. These are symbolic poems concerned with the integrity of the individual in family and society. In this sense, they are not so very far removed from Marie. One thinks, for instance, of the vassal Bisclavret’s love for his king, a love that saves his life because it is reciprocated, not betrayed as is his love for his wife.

The Auchinleck lays in their turn each test a different form of authority or cohesive social structure. In *Sir Orfeo*, the fairy king challenges the sovereignty of a mortal lord. In *Lay le Freine*, Guroun challenges the cloister wall. The rape of Degaré’s mother is recounted as a sinister abuse of *fin amor*, not to mention that it represents one more complicating event in the history of an already dysfunctional family. Taken together, the three lays present an anatomy of the powers of *eros* to integrate, preserve, or heal the human community in its broadest conceptions — subject to God, king, and courtesy — and in this they are completely faithful to the spirit of Marie.<sup>32</sup> More distinctly than general similarities such as length, verse form, and putative Breton sources, this theme of compulsion by a mysterious other, common in the French tradition as well, identifies the Breton lay in Middle English. All extant lays in English share the theme of mysterious ordeal.

#### CHAUCER AND CHESTRE: CRITICS OF THE FORM

*Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Lay le Freine*, along with *Landevalle*, the earlier Middle English version of the story in *Sir Launfal*, represent a first generation in the development of the English tradition of the lay. Two directions of adaptation mark the next generation. In the Northeast Midland stanzaic

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Beston (“Breton *Lai*,” 327–28): “If the *le Freine* poet is describing the *lais* as ‘mest o loue’ (so also the Ashmole MS, but ‘moost to lowe’ in the Harleian MS of *Sir Orfeo*), then he is referring almost exclusively to Marie, since love as a main theme appears only incidentally elsewhere, except in that group of *lais* that the English lay-writers do not seem to have known.”

<sup>32</sup> Northrup Frye (*The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* [Cambridge, 1976], 86) remarks, “When we come to this mythical core of a common, even a hackneyed situation, we come back to the problem . . . of having to distinguish what the individual story is saying from what the convention the story belongs to is saying through the story.”

lays, Christianization is the prevalent reaction to earlier models of the form. The other direction, witty sophistication and ironic self-commentary, is taken by poets whose names we happen, incidentally or not, to preserve. Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale" and Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* both reflect ironically and self-reflexively on the conventions of the form while nonetheless carrying them forward faithfully.

Chaucer's Franklin examines bonds of *gentillesse* by submitting two characters, Dorigen and Aurelius, to two tests of honor each. First, Dorigen endures her husband's long absence; later she endures the weight of her hasty vow to Aurelius. This second test of Dorigen generates tests of other characters as well; just as the honor of fairy king and steward are subsequently tested in *Sir Orfeo*, in Chaucer's poem, Arveragus, Aurelius, and then the magician are ultimately tested for their generosity and courtesy. To examine the episodic or strophic foundations in this narrative, however, is to see just what formal changes Chaucer has wrought in the genre called the *lay*.<sup>33</sup> The single largest is that the Franklin does not focus on one character throughout, as is the general rule of romance forms.<sup>34</sup>

The opening passages of "The Franklin's Tale" set the scene of Dorigen's marriage with echoes of *Lay le Freine*: "Hoom with his wyf he gooth to his contree . . . A yeer and moore lasted this blisful lyf" (800, 806). Dorigen's first trial comes with Arveragus's campaign, during which she delivers her lamentation provoked by "the grisly rokkes blake" (859). The second episode of her trial of loneliness, Aurelius's proposition, comes at a dance in a May-garden and preys on this discontent. Dorigen's parallel but contradictory vows, "Ne shal I nevere been untrewre wyf" (984) and "Thanne wol I love yow best of any man" (997) — one in earnest and the other "in pley" (988) — close the section and provide transition to the second major issue, Aurelius's trials of unrequited love.

With the love trials of the squire, the Franklin begins a complex parallelism that is the logical extension, for a lay with two principal characters, of the careful demarcation of episodes in a poem like *Sir Degaré*. The squire's prayer to Apollo (1031–79) and his retreat from the world match and balance Dorigen's lament, and also focus on the rocks: "Thanne certes to my lady may I seye, / 'Holdeth youre heste, the rokkes been awaye'" (1063–64). His journey to Orleans and the illusions he witnesses there (reminiscent of Orfeo's bizarre visions in the wasteland, which very likely influence them)

<sup>33</sup> Carole Koepke Brown asserts the key role of formal structure — specifically, alternating episodic parallelism — in the articulation of theme and meaning in Chaucer's lay; see "It Is True Art to Conceal Art": The Episodic Structure of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1992): 162–85.

<sup>34</sup> Strohm, "Origins and Meaning" (n. 5 above), 4.

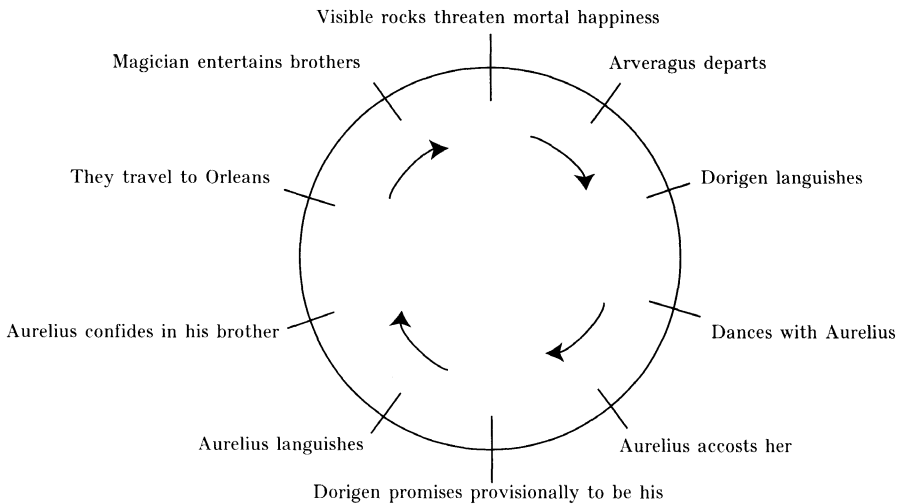


recall, at least in their impact on Aurelius, the crucial events in the Maygarden and their impact on Dorigen, especially the momentary fantasy that so nearly ruins her there:

Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
 Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon —  
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
 Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,  
 Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;  
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.  
 (992–98)

Under the magician's influence, Aurelius allows himself to fancy that he can work wonders to win Dorigen's love, as she allows herself to fancy that life could be rendered free of rocks. Like her trial of loneliness, Aurelius's trial of unrequited love ends with a vow he will not keep: "This bargayn is ful dryve, for we been knyht. / Ye shal be payed trewely, by my trouthe!" (1230–31). Thus the Franklin's early pattern of episodes employs recurring symbols (rocks, prayers, special *loci*, and vows) in a contrapuntal or alternating rhythm. Not all of his recurring symbols appear in each episode, as they do in the simpler Auchinleck lays; rather, contrasting sets of them recur alternately. In this first sequence of episodes, Chaucer sets Dorigen's fortunes into descent and Aurelius's, by contrast, into ascent:

*Trial 1: Dorigen's loneliness*



*Trial 2: Aurelius's unrequited love*

The pattern of rising and falling fortunes deployed in the conventional episodic sequence is not substantially different from that in the earlier lays, even though it may appear that Aurelius suffers a decline ("Aurelius languishes") at a point in the tale where Woolf's analogy to the wheel of Fortune would predict some form of triumph. After all, his woe is itself a sign of Dorigen's temporary safety from him and thus the temporary rise of her fortunes. Consequently, one might conclude that this lay is not a complicated departure from the norm of exclusive focus on one protagonist, at least not so much so as it may seem. Dorigen is clearly the central figure, and the squire's fortunes are but a kind of inverse index for hers. When Aurelius languishes, Dorigen survives.

From this midpoint the lay continues with what on the face of things seem two digressions. The first establishes the time of the magician's feat as winter, and the second concerns the astrological business of his feat. But woven throughout the episodes are the trappings of Aurelius's earlier prayer. For instance, Phoebus is in winter at his farthest from the earth, an event that plays ambivalently in the squire's maneuvers, and the rocks are finally covered through the auspices of such celestial bodies whose names also identify the squire's gods. Thus the Franklin reverses the order and direction of his counterpoint; he begins anew with the squire's limited victory, the covering of the rocks, reintroducing the celestial and astrological images characteristic of him, and thus moves through the squire's meeting with Dorigen at the temple to her second trial. The balancing episode of her second trial, her passionate soliloquy on suicides, follows his departure. Both episodes are marked with the devices associated with all her trials: her husband's absence during her great need, the classical (yet human and historical, as opposed to Aurelius's astrological and mythological) matter of her speech, and her vow:

I wol conclude that it is bet for me  
 To sleen myself than been defouled thus.  
 I wol be trewe unto Arveragus,  
 Or rather sleen myself in som manere. . . .  
 (1422–25)

The vow closes tightly the whole contrapuntal balance of Chaucer's "rhyme of parallel repetition," harkening back to Dorigen's original reflection on the rocks: "Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere" (893).

The Franklin ends his lay with three brief episodes that resolve the conflicts established before. Dorigen's confession to Arveragus ends in his assertion that "Trouthe," the symbolic power to which both Dorigen and Aurelius have sworn often and irresponsibly, "is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (1479). Dorigen's capitulation, encouraged however improbably by her husband, leads Aurelius to release her from her vow: "I have wel levere evere to suffre wo / Than I departe the love bitwix yow two" (1531–32). The

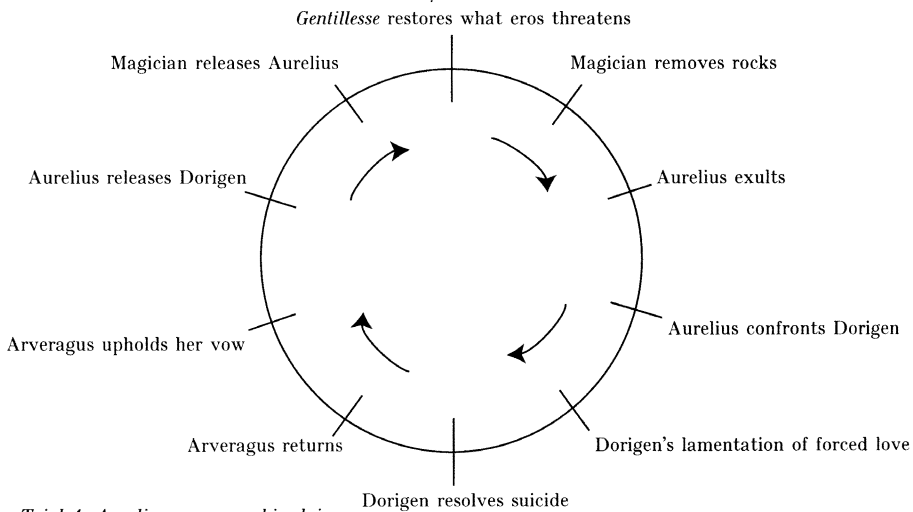
third of these emblematic events, the astrologer's grace in releasing Aurelius from his debt, establishes them as brothers in their forgiveness, yet grows in the astrologer's remarks to the Franklin's final, very self-interested image (in respect of the class ambitions he exhibits to Knight and Squire) of the whole community made one by love:

Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother.  
 Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght;  
 But God forbede, for his blisful myght,  
 But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede  
 As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!  
 (1608–12)

Moreover, the order and causal relationships of the three climaxes illustrate again the anatomy of love as a bond in society illustrated consistently by the Auchinleck lays. The unity of marriage generates the compassion and brotherhood that further resolve this plot.<sup>35</sup>

The tale's resolution completes another cycle of declining and rising fortunes:

*Trial 3: Dorigen's ethical dilemma*



*Trial 4: Aurelius renounces his claim*

<sup>35</sup> Harrington ("Redefining" [n. 12 above], 86) asserts that the triple resolution "memorably epitomizes the benevolent spirit" that he finds a characteristic feature of Middle English Breton lays. My analysis and Harrington's assertion, of course, concentrate on the pilgrim Franklin's point of view toward his story, a point of view whose *arriviste* tendencies are responsible for his naive misunderstanding of what a historical knight like Arveragus might resolve to do under the circumstances, and, no doubt, his idealistic confidence in the bonds of marriage. My study does not intend to diminish or lose sight of the poet Chaucer's superbly ironic analysis of gentry or bourgeois sensibility in the Franklin.

Aside from the influence of Orfeo's vision in the wasteland — parodied in the magician's entertainments and in this way enlisted as a satire of the squire's self-delusion — Chaucer assembles other motives and plot devices parallel to the Auchinleck lays. For instance, Dorigen's devotion to Arveragus, not only when he is gone but also when she obeys him at the end, suggests (beyond obvious debts to Boccaccio) a meditation on the positive and negative virtues of le Freine's selflessness and Orfeo's obsession. Likewise, Arveragus's reappearance results almost effortlessly in the restoration of harmony in his home and land, just as Orfeo's charismatic personality reveals him to his court even through his disguise and the marks of hardship upon him. Chaucer plays with the conventions of his sources and influences by reversing them; in "The Franklin's Tale," the lord is spirited away, as it were, by his manly concerns with warfare and adventure, leaving the lady behind, grief-stricken in the otherwise merry sunshine of his court. Furthermore, the astrologer has a role in Chaucer's plot as the alien challenger to courtesy identical to the conventional role of the fairy and rationalized not, as in *Lay le Freine*, as a sign of superstition and jealousy but as a sign that natural science is the descendent of natural magic. Such creatures provide a test of courtly reputation from beyond the court or even the human realm, just as the Green Knight or *Sir Orfeo's* fairy king.

Aurelius is somewhat reminiscent of Guroun and the fairy king, with whom he shares a certain degree of self-interest and the role of courtly seducer, but seen through the Franklin's attitudes. If Chaucer's tale is a reaction to the lay's tradition, as Loomis suggests,<sup>36</sup> it is so through the odd lens of the Franklin's worldview, in the manner of the small English tradition, and in reaction to continental *fin amor* traditions that Aurelius represents. Indeed, in a manner common to the English tradition, the lay's conclusion presents a sort of diagram of love's powers: devotion, fidelity, compassion, and fraternity are the expressions emblemized there in the place of the squire's frail infatuation, and they operate more broadly in the fictive community than his self-serving eroticism.

One of the four lays in tail-rhyme stanzas, *Sir Launfal* has none of Chaucer's complex structural modifications, although *The Earl of Tolouse*, another of the stanzaic lays, does. Like the earlier poets, Chestre focuses each episode on his hero. Like *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Launfal* is ostensibly about chivalry, but whereas *Sir Degaré* launches its central symbolic treatment of personal identity from a plot about chivalry, Chestre treats the social artifices of chivalry and courtly love themselves centrally and much more self-consciously and critically than do the poets of the Auchinleck MS. Notwithstanding that Chestre's hero is as one-dimensional as *Sir Degaré*, Chestre's

<sup>36</sup> Loomis, "Chaucer and the Breton Lays" (n. 7 above), 18–26.

artistic self-consciousness and wit give his work more in common with Chaucer's than with *Sir Degaré* or with the other stanzaic lays.<sup>37</sup>

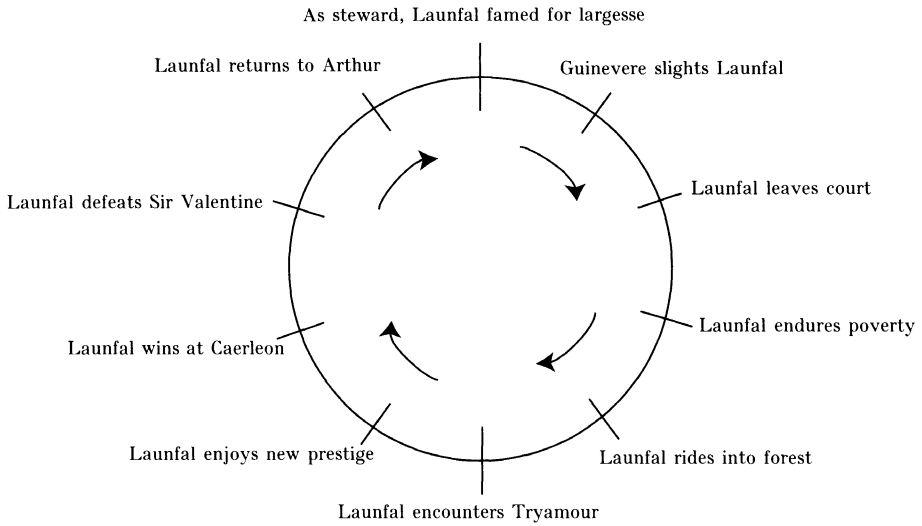
*Sir Launfal* is a long lay in eight episodes. Launfal, a member of the Round Table and Arthur's steward, is known especially for his largesse. The new queen Guinevere neglects Launfal at court, however, and under a pretense Launfal leaves Arthur to seek his adventures alone.<sup>38</sup> Severed from the court, he falls eventually into poverty and loneliness. One day while languishing in sorrow under a tree, he encounters messengers of the fairy Tryamour. They lead him to her pavilion deep in the forest, and her love and magical intervention bring him riches and power again, but under the stipulation that he not divulge their source. Launfal emerges from obscurity to exercise his new might in tournaments, in Caerleon and then in Lombardy, is victorious, and amasses new fame. Confident again, he returns to Arthur, where Guinevere challenges his honor once more. Under the queen's pressure, Launfal loses his composure and boasts of Tryamour's beauty, whereupon the fairy queen's interest and gifts abandon him, Guinevere accuses him falsely, and Arthur tries him for treason. His jurors pronounce Guinevere guilty in the incident but demand that for his exoneration Launfal prove the truth of his boast. Launfal remains helpless to persuade anyone or to locate Tryamour, his evidence, and can only wait for judgment or for her appearance. At last she comes and avenges him on Guinevere; exonerated, Launfal leaves Arthur with her. Thus the eight episodes turn Launfal's fortunes twice and recount two trials of his honor; each trial begins with Guinevere's machinations and ends with Tryamour's interventions and their attendant effects in his life:

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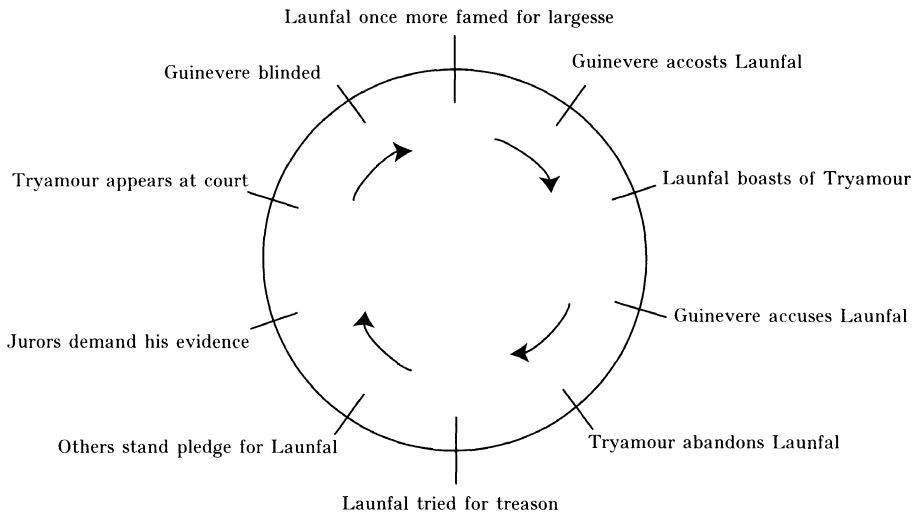
<sup>37</sup> Few commentators have liked *Sir Launfal*. Among the stronger negative reactions, Spearing ("Marie de France," 144) charges Chestre with "a strong identification . . . with his hero," which he reads to Chestre's embarrassment since "*Sir Launfal* is a fascinating specimen, because of the strength and transparency of Chestre's self-delusion. It has the extreme and powerful badness found in other works of self-pitying self-revelation that also at times plead to be rescued by being read as deliberate self-parody" (ibid., 156). In *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, "Piers Plowman"* (London, 1951), 34, George Kane calls Chestre's expanded opening "mealy-mouthed and sanctimonious." Defenders include B. K. Martin, "*Sir Launfal* and the Folktale," *Medium Ævum* 35 (1966): 199–210; Robson, "Symmetrical Composition" (n. 16 above), 29–33; P. J. Lucas, "Towards an Interpretation of *Sir Launfal* with Particular Reference to Line 683," *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970): 291–300; and my "Civilization and Savagery" (n. 2 above), 137, 146–48, which suggests that the poem's problems of bad taste are not unconscious but in fact thematic issues in a self-reflexive examination of the function of courtly literature in a post-chivalric culture.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of Chestre's strategic modifications of *Landevalle* and the simpler story told by Marie, see Furnish, "Civilization and Savagery," 137–43.

*Cycle 1: Launfal alienated at court and protected by fairy*



*Cycle 2: Launfal betrayed at court and exonerated by fairy*



Besides the rhythmic pattern in Launfal's riches and poverty, in his influence and alienation at court, and besides the familiar journey-motif, Chestre marks his episodes with an additional device, a pattern of oaths and lies in the dialogue. Predisposed, like the rest of the court, to suspect Guinevere's deceit, "For þe lady bar los of swych word / Ðat sche hadde lemmannys vnþer her lord" (46–47), Launfal grows incensed when she gives him no gift among those she distributes on the occasion of her marriage. Too proud to humble himself, he leaves under a concocted pretense, his father's death. His subsequent poverty, then, illustrates the consequences of his pride and dramatizes also the ironic justice following his own failure to be frank with Arthur. He grows entangled in his misconstructions. Asked by the mayor of Caerleon how Arthur fares, Launfal replies, "He faryþ as well as any man" (98), a world-weary assessment bordering on a pessimistic philosophy, it is true, but Launfal does not believe his own assessment; he offers it merely as a conventional pleasantry and polite evasion. His two companions give the identical lie to Guinevere when asked about Launfal (161), though they know at first hand his poverty. After Tryamour's intervention in his life, Launfal lies no more but catches the mayor in an embarrassing lie, an attempt to excuse his inhospitality.

Pride and falsification mark likewise the early episodes of the second cycle of fortunes. Guinevere baits Launfal by uttering an oath that, if not entirely false, is at least inflated and exaggerated in its courtly mannerism:

J haue þe louyd wyth all my myzt  
 More þan þys seuen zere!  
 But þat þou louye me,  
 Sertes, y dye for loue of ze. . . .  
 (677–80)

Under this pressure, Launfal first swears rashly: "J nell be traytour, þay ne nyzt, / Be God þat all may stere!" (683–84). But as she berates him, he loses control and boasts:

J haue loued a fayryr woman  
 Ðan þou euer leydest þyn ey vpon,  
 Þys seuen yer & more!  
 (694–96)

He betrays his oath just moments after reaffirming it, his self-esteem wavering before Guinevere's ridicule, and as he loses control of his emotions, he loses control of the events around him. The striking resemblance to Morgan's tests of Sir Gawain illustrates Chestre's pervasive irony. In a reversal of conventional roles, Guinevere becomes here the alien and challenger of courtesy while the literal fairy becomes the familiar and nutritive figure.

In contrast to the thematic sequence of oaths and lies in early episodes, Chestre marks the latter episodes of both cycles, the rising half of each cycle in Launfal's career, with deeds and spectacle that contrast with the otherwise prevalent courtly rhetoric. Though it is true that throughout the tournament episodes that mark Launfal's rising fortunes in Tryamour's care, knights swear oaths and make challenges, nonetheless Chestre's greater emphasis is directed to the description of spectacular deeds. Launfal is at the center of these spectacles, and he performs his deeds in arms to overcome those who swear rashly, just as he embarrasses the mayor in his lie. In vanquishing Sir Valentine, an Italian braggart, he restores fully his wonted prestige, and with this prestige he returns to Arthur. Thematic contrast of words and deeds continues in the trial episodes, in which the court's debate of his guilt wears on with no conviction or acquittal but during which Launfal's "borwes" (812, 815, 830) stand as his pledge that he will not flee. Their deeds insure his oath. The end of his plight comes with Tryamour's arrival at Arthur's court, marked by the king's short speech, "Ech man may yse þat ys soþe, / Bryztere þat ye be" (1004-5). Chestre marks Launfal's triumph additionally with the poetic justice of Tryamour's revenge (she blinds Guinevere who obscures the truth), a deed to contrast with Guinevere's verbal means of vengeance, the lie. Chestre associates the conventions and pitfalls of courtly rhetoric with all of Launfal's misfortunes, and he associates bold deeds and spectacle with all of Launfal's good fortune.

Guinevere's devices fall before the bond at last affirmed between Launfal and Tryamour and, less emphasized but hardly less important, the bond between Launfal and his fellow knights. Chestre's sensitivity to the lay's form and tradition penetrates even further; like Chaucer and the Auchinleck poets, he depicts the precedence and influence of simple erotic love and of fraternal fidelity in the formation of social bonds: Sir Hugh and Sir John, Percevall, and Gawain support with the devotion of brothers Launfal's cause against the selfish queen, and they uphold the propriety of his private love. They also illustrate the feudal social fidelity explored by Marie in *Equitan* and *Bisclavret*.

#### FURTHER MODIFICATIONS: THE ANONYMOUS LAYS IN TAIL-RHYME STANZAS

Chestre's lay in tail-rhyme stanzas departs from the other three of that type in its high degree of literary self-consciousness. Contemporary fashion or audience alone may account for the verse-form it shares with *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *The Earl of Tolouse*, but the latter three share features that allow consideration of them as a unit. They are all anonymous, unlike *Sir Launfal*, and, perhaps consistent with that, much less self-conscious in style. *Emaré* and *Sir Gowther* illustrate Christian adaptation of the form of the lay,



specifically the replacement of Celtic conventions of fairy magic by Christian miracles. These tales are distinctively later than the Auchinleck MS poems and yet less sophisticated as literary achievements than those, or than Chaucer's or Chestre's. These differences notwithstanding, the compositions bear strong structural likeness to the Auchinleck narratives and share thematic concern with the anatomy of love and the formation of public virtues.

The artistry among them displays a broad range of variation. *Sir Gowther* is the only one whose poet focuses on the hero throughout; it is also the shortest. *Emaré* has the most regular strophic pattern of episodes marked by regularly reiterated symbols and most closely resembles the controlled narrative rhythm of the Auchinleck poems. *Sir Gowther* and *The Earl* have less prominent, less rhythmical divisions of episode. Consequently, only in *Emaré* does the narrative line of heroic trial suggest a circle, or revolution, with the same clarity as in the early lays.

The story of *Emaré* resembles the Constance legend and examines the role of woman in society. The recurrence of sea-passages plainly marks the episodes of this lay, as does the marvelous gem-cloak that is associated, albeit not simply, with the heroine's calamities.<sup>39</sup> Her exiles at sea, prompted by her father's incestuous pressure on her and, later, her mother-in-law's fear and jealousy, interrupt two of her fundamental roles in society: daughter and wife. In Rome Emaré pursues her third role, as mother, at last without calamity or interruption. In these latter episodes, the poet identifies the child Segramour with the same strong power to evoke desire earlier witnessed in his mother and in the cloak:

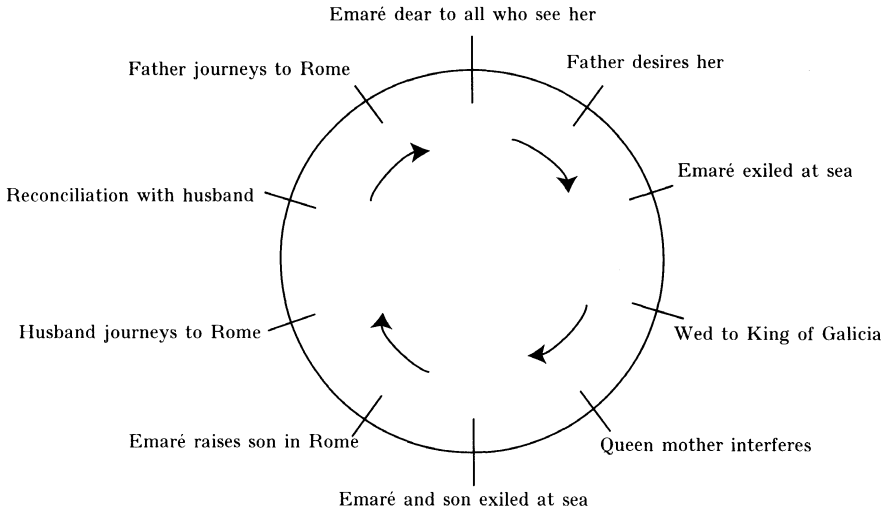
The Emperours hert anamered gretlye  
Of þe chylde þat rode hym by  
Wyth so louely chere.

(997–99)

Moreover, the same peculiar charismatic power resolves all of Emaré's plights: the child's attractiveness reunites Emaré with her husband and reconciles her at last with her father. Her fortunes turn with her arrival in Rome as those from whom she parted before make their own sea passages and Rome becomes the hub of all action, the shrine of every character's pilgrimage. *Emaré*'s structure reveals the influence of hagiography when the heroine's final and total social integration in all her roles — heir apparent, wife, queen, mother — resolves implicitly in the single role of motherhood and in the spiritual focus of Rome:

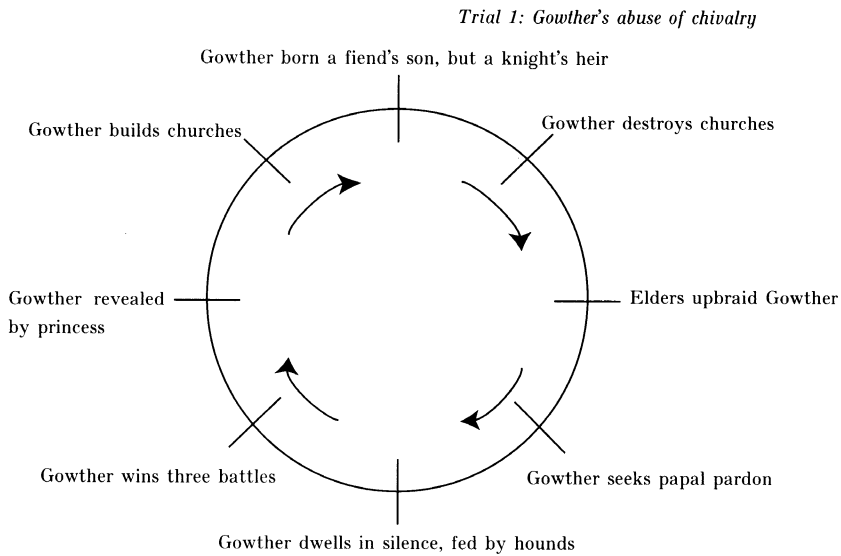
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<sup>39</sup> Ross Arthur cautions against over-reading the gem-cloak as sign; see "Emaré's Cloak and Audience Response" in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, 1989), 80–92, at 84–86.

*Trial 1: Emaré, "fayrest creature borne" (50)**Trial 2: Segramore "fayrest chyld on lyfe" (728)*

As *Emaré* employs the motif of the drifting bark, *Sir Gowther* employs another conventional symbol, the sword, working at first in alternation and then in combination with various tokens of divine direction in Gowther's life. Gowther's spurious knighthood is first revealed in contrast to the old duke's nobility, even though Gowther carries that knight's sword and even though he was christened his son. Gowther does not question himself, however, until confronted with his sins by his mother and an old earl; this first trial is marked by the terrible uses of his sword but turned toward the second by a woman and a knight who correct young Gowther and who embody or bespeak the proper ideals of chivalry. According to the old earl's formula, that Gowther is "sum fendys sone, we weyn; / That werkus hus this woo," a Christian man cannot be untrue to the secular ethics of chivalry; chivalry is more than a profession, it is an expression of character (209–10). Because Gowther's title is false and his sins many, the pilgrimage to Rome and his confession there imply, like the earl's observation, that the basis of knighthood lies in Christianity. Like Gowther's mother and the old earl, the pope who prescribes his penance is a symbolic figure embodying an ideal of chivalry. The pilgrimage and confession are Gowther's second trial, on which the recognition brought by the two parental figures depend for continuing effect. The order and subordination of episodes are meaningful: all other functions and trappings of knighthood — courtesy, valor, arms, and rank — are subordinate to the primary function as a Christian profession. Indeed, Gowther's later trials, in the contrast they establish with the episodes

recounting his wicked youth, demonstrate that secondary functions of knighthood grow out of Christian profession:



Like Orfeo in the wilderness, Gowther spends his isolation, fast, and silence becoming worthy to be tried again. The three successive battles in the emperor's lands, finally ending his penance, present a knight who wages war against the heathen enemies of God and fights as a part of Christian society. Here the sword to which Gowther has clung stubbornly throughout his trials becomes important again, reinforced as a symbol by the several horses and suits of armor. These latter, in their meaningful array of colors and mysterious manifestation to the hero, indicate divine agency and a penitential and restorative process.<sup>40</sup> Curiously and significantly, the sword also functions to suggest a diametrical contrast with Marie's *Yonec*. In *Sir Gowther*, the youth employs the sword to prove the heritage of the mother's husband, not the natural father, as in Marie's story. Sword, mounts, and harness show Gowther achieving simultaneously the merits of true knighthood and a spiritual renewal. Finally, the mute princess's miraculous recovery and

<sup>40</sup> Shirley Marchalonis, in "Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 14–29, at 20–23, discusses certain parallel associations working in the progressive scheme of black, red, and white colors. Among other associations, she identifies the pattern as significant of Christian penance, purification, and salvation, and also of chivalric humility, nobility, and freedom. The double association reinforces the poem's suggestion that Christian profession is integral to chivalry.

speech betoken Gowther's salvation. After hearing her, the pope absolves Gowther, and the knight has thus achieved the most appropriate atonement for the sins of his youth by using his sword, the same tool with which he sinned, to prove himself at last. The final trial is the reintegration of the good knight in society. Gowther learns to repair his earlier wastes by building churches and monasteries. Sometimes a warrior, he is later always a Christian, and eventually a saint. In *Sir Gowther*, knighthood is shown neither sufficient to itself nor an end in itself, but as the central expression of a pious, worthy life; foremost, chivalry certainly must be conducted as an office of Christianity. The sword binds all these episodes and themes, as do the gem-cloak in *Emaré*, the similar heirloom cloth in *Lay Le Freine*, Sir Degaré's horses and chivalric gear, Orfeo's harp, and Dorigen's rocks. The meaning of Gowther's sword as a symbol, however, is continually qualified by his strange parentage and refined by the sequence of sacred offices and divine tokens: his christening, the greyhound, the three horses and suits of armor, and the princess's apparent resurrection.

Like Chaucer's lay, *The Earl of Toulouse* gives two focuses: Barnard, the titular character, and the empress of Almayn, whom the poem in one line seems to name Dame Beulyboon. When first introduced they represent opposing factions, as Barnard is pitted against the emperor in civil war. Moreover, as in *Sir Launfal*, a motif of oaths and troth-plighting knits together this otherwise diversely textured lay. After a lengthy opening account of the war, Barnard undergoes his first personal adventure as he steals into the capital in disguise to witness the lady's beauty. He enlists the aid of a captured knight, the emperor's vassal, promising him riches and freedom in exchange for safe conduct. The vassal Trylabas in turn swears loyalty in the task, but on their arrival secretly betrays the earl to the lady. However, rather than betraying Barnard herself, the lady warns Trylabas, "Thy soule ys loste yf thou do so; / Thy trowthe þou schalt fulfyll" (281–82). Trylabas again betrays Barnard by laying an ambush, but the earl survives, slays Trylabas, and escapes to his own lands. This much of the poem is mostly about the titular hero and comes to a hiatus as he assures his people that:

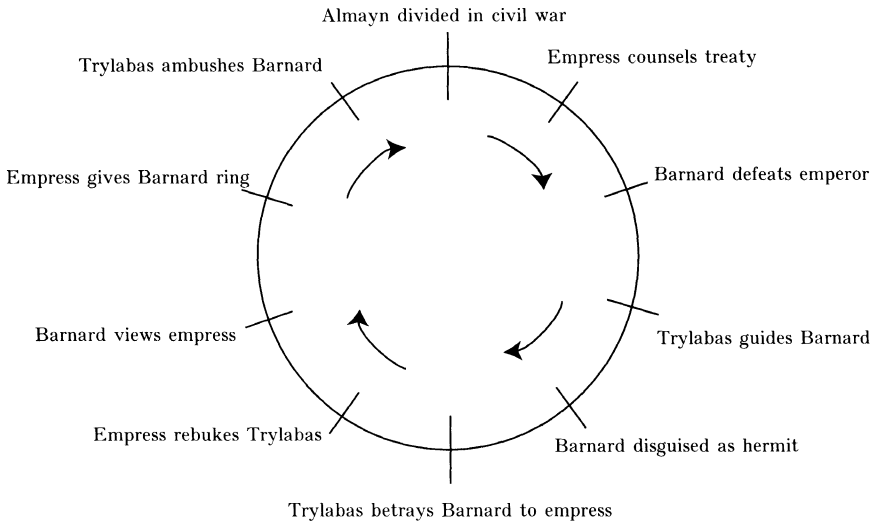
The Emperour, wythowte lees,  
Y trowe, wyll let vs be in pees,  
And warre on vs no mare.

(472–74)

The civil war that opened the poem drops from attention at this point; so far the poet has simply tested and proved Barnard's prowess twice. In a strategy like Chaucer's, at this hiatus the poet moves to other issues, to the empress and her trials.<sup>41</sup> She is harassed by lascivious court chamberlains who, after she rebukes but also forgives them, conspire to betray her for

their safety. They cause a youthful retainer to be found and slain in her room, after which she is imprisoned until her husband returns to try her. Barnard then comes to her defense, reciprocating her earlier intervention on his behalf and developing fully the characteristic parallel construction of a lay:

*Cycle 1: Treachery against Barnard*

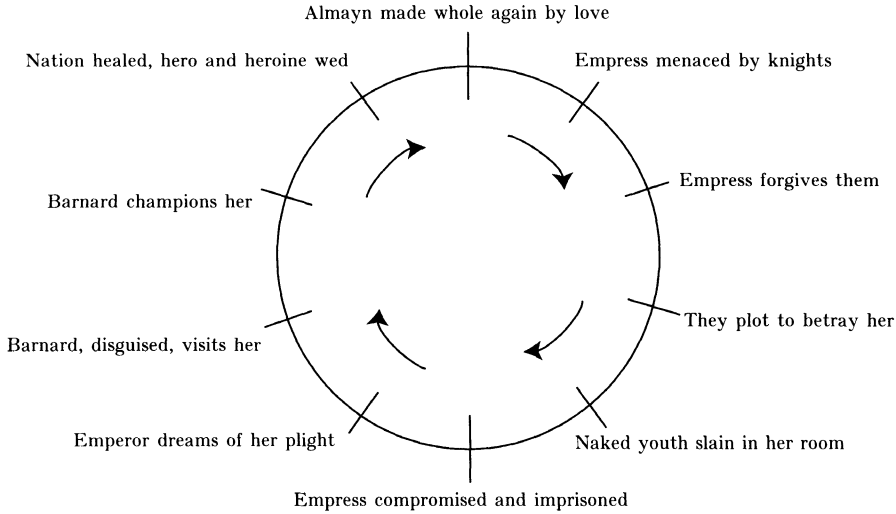


Like the initially unformed or unfinished character central to other poems, especially in *Sir Degaré* and *Lay le Freine*, the divided state encounters dangers and trials.<sup>42</sup> Both its dangers and its virtues come from within, a condition one sees also but more microcosmically, through psychodramatic symbolism, in all the central characters of the Auchinleck MS lays. Trylabas, the first manifestation of the dangers in a fractured nation, is so fixed in feudal loyalty that he betrays an honest man in order to remain true to his liege lord.<sup>43</sup> This paradox of feudal government, then, is the state's first trial. When Trylabas dies, much remains in the way of re-unification, because the people stand in divided camps, even though not at war. This effect gives Barnard's early homecoming its hollowness and anticlimax, for

<sup>41</sup> I discern underlying coherent, episodic structure despite this appearance of disjointedness; see my "The Modernity of *The Erle of Tolous* and the Decay of the *Breton Lai*," *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993): 69–77, at 70–72.

<sup>42</sup> In "The Modernity of *The Erle of Tolous*," 73–76, I interpret this magnification of focus as a sign of the genre in decadence.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Donovan "Breton Lay" (n. 9 above), 209.

*Cycle 2: Treachery against empress*

one expects the earl's affairs, which have been the poem's exclusive focus to that point, to be the poem's center. The poem is not ended or the conflicts resolved, however, as long as the state remains divided and government ineffective.

The lady's trials depict corruption among minor officials and in the law and, moreover, the perversion of love, like Aurelius's; thus these episodes comment simultaneously on problems of state and on the traditional subject of the lays, the nature of love. Barnard's trials affirm feudal honor tentatively, but the lady's trials question it again, because the spotless lady cannot defend herself honorably; she is helpless precisely because of her honor. But just as her insistence on Trylabas's honor had earlier saved the earl, who would have been helpless, however guiltless, without her, now he defends her against lies and treason. Barnard's explicitly erotic affection for the empress is at last her only rescue, a love born of charismatic appeal, like *le Freine's*, which is so strong that its reputation alone draws the earl to his foe's court just to witness it.<sup>44</sup>

The few stanzas following Barnard's victory in combat resemble the Franklin's three concluding images in their quick passage and emblemism. The emperor's enlightenment, gratitude, and honest oaths reconcile church

<sup>44</sup> For an account of the symbolic function of beauty and eros in *The Earl*, see Furnish, "The Modernity of *The Erle of Tolous*," 73–76.

to crown and rejoin the divided empire. Moreover, he displays a new degree of compassion:

“My frende so free,  
My wrath here y the forgeue,  
My helpe, my loue, whyll y leue,  
Be Hym that dyed on tree!”

Togedur louely can they kysse;  
Therof all men had grete blysse. . . .  
(1197–1202)

Like Orfeo's loyal retainer, Barnard becomes steward of the empire and in time emperor; married to the widowed empress, the earl begets heirs who give evidence of insuring the nation's future (1216–18). In his movement from Barnard to the lady and back, and in the emblematic triple resolution, this poet generates a form remarkably similar to Chaucer's alternating rhythm but uses fewer, less emphatic symbols more sporadically and gears the plot more to action and spectacle. The empress of Almayn provides the center or focus for this treatment of the national state, which suggests that in her charismatic charm and calm devotion to honor and truth rest certain features crucial to the inspiration of proper government. In her almost unearthly charm and her centrality to the plot as a force of attraction (in the lays, the feminine complements of chivalric prowess), she resembles Dame Heurodis quite closely.

Perhaps the significant differences in topic and scope in *The Earl of Toulouse* witness a provenance in the War of the Roses. The rhetoric of episodic structure in *The Earl* suggests that the state's security depends upon its virtuous members; in times of national trial, it goes within itself, as it were, much like the distressed hero. Like *Sir Orfeo's* closing image of a strengthened court provided with a scheme of succession, *Degare's* and *Emaire's* closing image of a united family, *Lay le Freine's* closing image of the lord's fulfilled social responsibilities and the heroine's restoration to the bosom of her family, and Chaucer's closing image of canceled obligations and contagious generosity, the resolved plot of *The Earl* depicts the rise of sound government and social harmony out of an original and exemplary source in erotic love. The poet delays the consummation of Barnard's and the empress's love, however, not merely until the empire is reunified, but further, until he can dispatch the emperor in a natural course of events and join the hero and heroine in wedlock. Notably, in a bit of poetic justice like that in Marie's *Yonec*, only then does the lady bear heirs and the poet emphasize a complete restoration of order. In this strategy of plotting, marriage as a sign of integration and legitimacy, *The Earl* resembles *Sir Degare*. *The Earl* includes two trials and a turn of fortune's wheel for Almayn; the empress's

involvement in the earl's adventures helps end the nation's decline into chaos and initiates events that bring the cycle full, bring the state unity and tranquillity once more.

Other relevant parallels may be seen between the later stanzaic and earlier poems in the tradition. Orfeo and Barnard are both civic chiefs who undertake harrowing, lone adventures in garb of humility, but Orfeo's "sclavin" (228) is less a penitent's or devotee's robe than a sign of his brutalized mortal condition, in contrast to his wonted royalty. On the other hand, *The Earl's* poet clothes Barnard in "armytes wede" and then later in "monkys wede" (245, 1065) as a disguise appropriate to his character and trials, one of which is to restore the church's influence in the government of Almayn. Degaré becomes a knight like his father, as does Gowther, but *Sir Degaré* explores the individual heroic prowess of knighthood, whereas *Sir Gowther* discovers knighthood's divine inspiration and sacred office. That le Freine leaves a convent to become a royal consort is crucial to her story, but Emaré is a royal wife and mother whose fate cannot be righted without intervention, almost as direct and mysterious as that in Gowther's fate, from divine sources. In an astonishingly efficient way, given what otherwise has seemed to scholars a piecemeal accretion into the tradition, the later stanzaic lays seem to parallel, answer, or update the earlier poems in the tradition.<sup>45</sup>

The fashion of tail-rhyme stanzas is only the first and easiest distinction between the Auchinleck MS poems and these later poems. Remarkably, however, the stanzaic lays preserve all the essential narrative elements of the English lay form earlier codified in the Auchinleck MS: they preserve "the rhyme of parallel repetition,"<sup>46</sup> characterization advanced by distinct trials in episodic succession, and the strategy of plotting by the ultimately benevolent revolution of fortunes. That they alter formulae of character and motivation, then, indicates only that they carry on criticism and revision of their traditional material.

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<sup>45</sup> Frye (*Secular Scripture* [n. 32 above], 59) observes that in contrast to realism, "The symbolic spread of a romance tends rather to go into its literary context, to other romances that are most like it in the conventions adopted. The sense that more is meant than meets the ear in romance comes very largely from the reverberations that its familiar conventions set up within our literary experience, like a shell that contains the sounds of the sea."

<sup>46</sup> Kiernan, "*Athelston*" (n. 15 above), 353.



## CONCLUSIONS

The key compositional techniques in the lay are balance and rhythm. The proportioned episodes and patterned recurrences of symbols are elegant, but also rhetorical. The perfect circle described by these plots, which Woolf, Harrington, and I liken to Fortune's wheel, is a meaningful analogy in the lives of the protagonists. In these poems, human experience leaves a certain form of existence — figuratively, the apex of the wheel<sup>47</sup> — and undergoes an utter transformation, returning in triumph to the same condition as at the beginning: to home, heritage, or family. The lay is a form that traces a character's trials and growth through the events of its fate and around a wheel of episodes, marks the crises clearly with meaningful symbols, and therefore implies the working of a central power, a focus in the protagonist's life and society. In the English tradition, as also in Marie, this center is most often some manifestation of love.

But though the circle the hero traces may be elegant, it is by no means unproblematic. The opening and closing of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* present readers with a perplexing problem in grasping the poet's conception of history, not to mention geography. The opening relates that:

Pis king soiournd in Traciens,  
 Þat was a cité of noble defens  
 (For Winchester was cleped þo  
 Traciens, wiþ-outen no.)  
 (47–50)

And after Orfeo's successful venture in fairyland:

So long he haþ þe way y-nome  
 To Winchester he is y-come,  
 Þat was his owhen cité;  
 Ac no man knewe þat it was he.  
 (477–80)

Such radical myth-making has precedent in fourteenth-century English letters: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to cite a familiar instance, recounts that Aeneas rebuilt Troy in western Europe and, further extending the myth of Trojan lineage, that his descendant Brutus founded Britain (1–36). Such peculiar telescoping or typological connection of the classical and medieval have several affinities among the English lays beyond the equation of Thrace and Winchester. The marriage of Degaré's father and mother, for instance, does much more than legitimize him; it also serves as sign of a

<sup>47</sup> This view of the lay implies that it serves as a comic complement for the *de casibus* tragedy, another formally distinctive genre taking the form of the wheel of fortune. In the *de casibus* tragedy, of course, the plot commences and concludes at the nadir of the wheel.

complex integration of fairy and human within him, thus a finalized process of self-discovery and identity.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, malevolent Gowther the devil's son, in possession of his mother's husband's fief, leaves home on a pilgrimage to return only when he has driven the devil from himself and become more really the duke's son and heir. Because the duke christened him, Gowther enjoys the opportunity to become an entirely other person, a saint. Orfeo, Degaré, and Gowther find no new countries but new selves. They end more or less where they begin, but in an altered, and better, condition. The Breton lays in Middle English thus share a romantic theme about the formation and transformation of heroic character, but more than that, about the transformation of their own traditional materials.<sup>49</sup>

*Emaré* is a complex and intriguing case in point. The early passages concern her mantle's mysterious crafting by "The Amerayle dowzter of heþennes" (109). The garment's beauty is strongly associated with Emaré's own, and the poet shapes it as a complex sign of culture, "nortowre" (731), or the enhancement that civilization brings to nature, especially through love. In the course of the narrative, the capacity of the gem-cloth to compel passion or affection is gradually transferred to Emaré, and eventually, when the garment is stored away, to Segramour:

And she sewed sylke-werk yn bour,  
And tawzte her sone nortowre;  
But euyr she mornede style.

When þe chylde was seuen yer olde,  
He was bothe wyse and bolde,  
And wele made of fleshe and bone;  
He was worþy vnþer wede, . . .

(730–36)

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Rumble, following other editors, emends in *Sir Degaré* an initial identification of the hero's father (line 100 of Schmidt's edition, "Iich am comen here a fairi knyzte") because it is inconsistent with the poem's ending, where Degaré's parents are at last wed. Evidently, some editors assume that the poet needs a mortal man for this resolution. Rumble's corresponding line (90) reads "Y am com to the as a knyght." See *Sir Degaré, in The Breton Lays in Middle English* (Detroit, 1965), 45–78. The emendation, however, merely trades one inconsistency for another, for in the Auchinleck MS context, the knight's long-standing secret knowledge of the maiden and his assault in the forest can hardly be understood as other than a mysterious fairy intrusion of the sort in *Sir Orfeo* or, for that matter, in *Yonec*.

<sup>49</sup> Discussing a similar problem in the opening and closing frame of the Apollonius story, Frye (*Secular Scripture*, 49–50) observes that "This principle of action on two levels, neither of them corresponding very closely to the ordinary world of experience, is essential to romance, and shows us that romance presents a *vertical* perspective which realism, left to itself, would find it very difficult to achieve. The realist, with his sense of logical and horizontal continuity, leads us to the end of his story; the romancer, scrambling over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get us to the top of it."

All men louede Segramowre  
 Bothe yn halle and yn bowre,  
 Whersoeuur he gan gone.

(739–41)

Thus the mysterious heathen magic in the cloth metamorphoses gradually during the tale's course to a power emitted in Rome from the good mother, a type of Mary, and then from her son the family's harmonizer, a type of Christ.<sup>50</sup> John Spiers, however, suggests that "we still can apprehend in our version the feeling or suggestion that Emaré is a supernatural or otherworld being, a faery."<sup>51</sup> It is a measure of the poem's period and Christianization that our apprehension is only a "feeling" (I might call it a recognition of parallelism, or Kiernan's "calculated sense of *déjà vu*") conditioned by our experience with other lays and knowledge of the ongoing process of redaction within a body of traditional material. In this collocation of Constance saga, Swan Maiden, and Helena material,<sup>52</sup> there is no occasion of fairy power in the literal sense represented by other lays, yet Spiers feels the presence of the fairy behind the poem strongly enough to center his whole discussion of *Emaré* around it. In *Emaré*, the generic expectation of fairy magic is satisfied by a parallel though more modern type of paganism associated with sorcery, oriental "hepennes," presumably more real or more urgent than fairies to this poet and his fifteenth-century audience. Indeed, in the narrative process of the poem itself, the mysterious power first evoked for the cloth is subsumed by Christian miracle.

The vehicles of such residual, mysterious, almost inexplicable power in the lays' folk-matter always bring two elements together: mystery (either heathen magic or Christian miracle) and love. Heurodis's abduction comes about through the inexplicable and adamant compulsion of the fairy king. When Orfeo tames the fairy, he retains from him even more of what he already practiced in his music: that same compelling, charismatic force with which the fairy abducted Heurodis and which subsequently inspires Orfeo's steward and court. Le Freine absorbs the clear light of grace from her Christian education, and yet there resides in her story, like Emaré's, an association of her splendor with that of the heirloom cloth she carries. Like a magnet, the empress of Almayn draws Barnard to her, and her attraction generates his love and restores harmony in their nation. Effortlessly, even incredibly, Arveragus's evocation of Truth settles Dorigen's dilemma and

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Arthur ("Emaré's Cloak" [n. 39 above], 82): "He functions, therefore, as a kind of touchstone for faith."

<sup>51</sup> John Spiers, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London, 1947), 157.

<sup>52</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Mediaeval Romance in England: A Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-Cyclic Metrical Romances* (1924; repr., New York, 1969), 29.

restores civic harmony to its wonted authority in his court. The charismatic or compelling figures common to all these lays, then — the bright sources of illumination, love, or power — are self-reflexive signs of the poet's rhetorical making.

Nowhere is this more explicit than in Chestre's treatment, that most self-conscious treatment of the poet working to be found in this genre. Sir Launfal the honorable but naive and proud knight becomes transformed, legendary, and immortal — that is, literary — living in Olyroun where any man "euery er, vpon a certayn day" (1024) may have his encounter with him. For Chestre the fairy is an important part of history: the realm of the fairy stands for the magic exerted by legendary ideas. *Sir Degaré's* conclusion, the wedding of fairy father and mortal mother, possesses a similar symbolic valence. Degaré, who has struggled throughout his adventures with a complicated sense of his own identity, brings his father into the mortal domain and tames him under the power of the marriage ceremony, just as through music Orfeo tames and dispatches the fairy's threat from his mind and his realm, and just as Gowther's Christian discipline in restraining and then using his sword makes the erstwhile demon a saint. Thus Degaré and Gowther acknowledge and in so doing master a special wellspring of power within themselves. The wedding ceremony is a sign of the completed formation and socialization of Degaré, just as the christening in youth and sanctification in age are such signs in Gowther. In these very conquests and exploitations of the primitive by the sophisticated (or just of the old by the new), and in *Lay le Freine's* critical rationalization of the fairy (not to mention the translation from Marie's French), the tradition of the lay is transformed literally from antique, Celtic, French, or otherwise foreign poetry into English poetry that reveals and also sometimes reflexively considers the imperial modification and absorption of ancient sources by modern authors.<sup>53</sup> *Sir Orfeo* strikes the very image of such transformations when the hero leaves his royal city Thrace but in returning to the same city returns to Winchester. Thus the Middle English lays are also about history, not so much about national or social history (although they sometimes but rarely develop these topics, too) as about their own literary heritage, their appropriation and recuperation of old poetry into new.

The eight or nine poems commonly thought of as the Middle English Breton lays achieve a loose unity of effect through their thematic structure and symbolic motifs. Different from their larger rambling cousins the chivalric romances not simply in their shared focus on love and lesser emphasis upon arms, they also differ in narrative economy. If a sense of mystery is among

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<sup>53</sup> Lerer ("Artifice and Artistry" [n. 30 above], 94) asserts *Sir Orfeo's* self-conscious "vision of art's power to reshape experience."

the chief attractions of the lays, as seems clear, that mystery is as much produced by their lean composition, lacking exposition of the kind one finds in Chrétien, for instance, as by marvelous characters, creatures, or events. Compared even to Marie, these poems are typically reluctant to explain action. For instance, the poem makes clear *when* Sir Orfeo takes to the wilderness, but not fully *why*. The logic is expressed not prosaically but obliquely, by juxtaposition. In the place of exposition is their elegant symbolism, the focused intensity of attention to one significant object, such as Orfeo's harp or Dorigen's "grisly rokkes blake." If, finally, romance and Breton lay are related in a continuum but not identical, one could say that the lays are more lyrical, poetic, or even mythological, the romances more narrative and relatively more prosaic. Comparisons, of course, are odious, and the one just made is grossly unfair to great feats of poetry such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or any of Chrétien's wonderful compositions. One recalls, however, the delicious chattiness of Chrétien's prologues. Dilation can be one of the pleasures of chivalric romance, just it can be in its heirs *Tom Jones* and *Middlemarch*. Thus, while the comparison may be marginally unfair, the distinction between the economy of the Middle English lays and the dilated style of the chivalric romances may be useful to grasp.

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