

CHRETIEN DE TROYES ENGLISH'D*

There can be little doubt that of the works of Old French literature which exercised the greatest influence both inside and outside France in the Middle Ages the Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes are amongst the most important. It has been recently argued with considerable plausibility that part of Chrétien's original audience was almost certainly to be found at the Anglo-Angevin courts, and further that much of Old French Arthurian verse romance can equally well be regarded as English literature in French.¹ The transmission of Chrétien's romances in predominantly continental French manuscripts is, of course, not a serious obstacle to the idea of an English audience, as the mother dialect remained intelligible to Anglo-Norman speakers for most of the Middle Ages and might even have enjoyed a certain privileged status at court. That one of Chrétien's romances was copied on at least one occasion by an insular scribe is evident from the Anglo-Norman manuscript of the *Perceval* contained in MS. London, College of Arms, Arundel XIV. It is also significant that a good number of the manuscripts of Chrétien date from the period during which Middle English romance flourishes.²

Ywain and Gawain and *Sir Perceval of Galles* (hereafter *YG* and *SP*) are the only two surviving adaptations of Chrétien's work in Middle English, although there are plenty of other Middle English romances based on Old French texts.³ Worth mentioning in the present context are *Lybeaus Desconus*, an adaptation of Renaut de Beaujeu's *Le Bel Inconnu*, a romance much in the manner of Chrétien,⁴ and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain and Gologros and Gawain*, both based on stories from First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, a text which, significantly, is never detached in the manuscripts from Chrétien's unfinished last romance.⁵ This would again lend support to the view that manuscripts of Chrétien's works circulated in England (although oral transmission cannot be ruled out). Knowledge of this Continuation is also apparent in *SP* and strongly confirms the view that the English poet worked directly from the Old French text.⁶ This is undoubtedly true for *YG* and the discussion of the techniques and results of adaptation that follows is based on that assumption.⁷

Suggesting that *YG* and *SP* are comparable in all respects would be misleading, but a representative selection from the material available does indicate that both English adaptors have certain procedures in common and that the end products are in some ways two of a kind. Although I maintain that both English poets worked from manuscripts of Chrétien's romances, it is certainly true that *YG* is a closer form of adaptation than *SP*. There are more instances of literal translation in *YG*, for example, although they are not absent in *SP*. Moreover, the poet of *YG* has left the narrative structure of Chrétien's poem intact, whereas the poet of *SP* has created that most extraordinary of works, a *Perceval* romance without the

Grail, and has also excised all of the Gauvain adventures from Chrétien's text, adventures which are an essential part of the narrative structure of the French romance. The reasons for these radical narrative modifications by the poet of *SP* will be suggested later. In both cases, we are dealing with abridgements of the original texts, in *YG* from 6, 818 lines to 4, 032, and in *SP* from 9, 234 lines to 2, 288.⁸ It seems therefore logical to look first to see how these drastic reductions can be accounted for, and I shall look first at matters of form and style before gradually moving on in the direction of meaning and content.⁹

Some of the finest passages of Chrétien's romances are his descriptive ones, be they of persons, landscapes, or combats, and it can be argued that these lengthy parts form an essential element of the French romance tradition. The portrait of the heroine is one of the best known types, and has been ably analysed by Alice Colby.¹⁰ Chrétien weaves the traditional rhetorical female portrait into the fabric of Yvain's long lament on his impossible situation (1428-1506); the poet of *YG*, on the other hand, reduces this lament to just 10 lines (893-902), where the description of Alundyne simply reads:

That lady es ful gent and small,
Hir yghen clere als es cristall,
Sertes þare es no man olive,
That kowth hir bewtese describe. (899-902)

In *Perceval*, Chrétien gives a long and celebrated description of Blanche-fleur during the hero's first encounter with her (1795-1829):¹¹ in *SP*, there is no such description at the corresponding place.

The battle descriptions, too, undergo similar modifications at the hands of the English adaptors. The description in *Yvain* of the hero's combat with Esclados le Roux takes up some 56 lines (816-872), but in *YG* it is reduced to 26 strongly formulaic ones (635-660). *Perceval's* fight with the Orgeuilleux de la Lande and its equivalent in *SP* will also serve as an example. After nine lines (3918-3926), Chrétien interrupts the description by means of *occupatio*, and describes how *Perceval* sends his opponent back to Arthur's court. The English poet is typically to the point and typically formulaic:

No more spake þay þat tyde,
Bot sone to-gedir gan þay ryde
Als men, þat wolde were habyde,
With schafte and with schelde.
Than sir Percevell þe wight
Bare down þe blake knyght. (1913-1918)

The following hundred lines and more of *SP* are devoted to a rather mercenary episode in which *Perceval* has to fight a giant in order to win back the ring his mother had given him at the beginning of the poem (425-432). This is absent in Chrétien, but the English poet may well have got the

idea from his mother's advice to Perceval in ll. 550-555 of the French romance.

In descriptions of buildings, Chrétien is also much more extensive than the English adaptations. The castle of Gauvain's relative in *Yvain* (3773-3781) is reduced in *YG* to "A full fayre castell" (2210). A similar case is that of the damsel's tent, described in all its splendour at the beginning of Chrétien's *Perceval* (635-652), but changed in *SP* to a hall and cut back to "One his way, as he gan ryde, / He fand e an haulte per besyde" (433-434).

On a smaller scale, details of time and distance, as vague as they are in Chrétien, and in romance in general, are also often missing in *YG* and particularly in *SP*. The damsel who finds Yvain in the woods states (3082-3083) that he will need at least fifteen days to recover, but this specification is missing in the corresponding episode in *YG* (1830-1832). The celebrated opening to Chrétien's *Perceval*, which sets the season as spring ("Ce fu au tans qu'arbre florissent," etc., 69 ff.), is likewise missing in the English version.¹² Many of Chrétien's proper names of places and persons are omitted in the two Middle English versions. In Calogrenant's story in the French text, the forest is named as Broceliande (189), but no name is given in the English adaptation. The geographical names of Arthurian Britain, such as Carduel, are modified in *SP*, and Blanche fleur's Belrepeire is transformed into the supernatural-sounding Maydenlande (956). Perceval's opponents in Chrétien are often named (Clamadeu des Illes, Anguingeron, the Orgeuilleux de la Lande), but they remain anonymous for the large part in *SP*, with the exception of the sultan, Gollerotherame (1651, etc.).

These exotic names in *SP* lead conveniently on to an apparent exception to the general rule that the two English versions abridge their models. They suggest a taste for the fantastic and sensational which is mirrored in both *YG* and *SP* as a whole. The often literal translation of the description of the Giant Herdsman from *Yvain* in *YG* already points to a different attitude to this kind of passage, a reluctance to abridge. I give both descriptions below:

Si vi qu'il ot grosse la teste,
 Plus que roncins ne autre beste,
 Chevos meslez et front pelé,
 S'ot plus de deus espanz de le,
 Oroilles mossues et granz,
 Auteus com a uns olifanz,
 Les sorciz granz et le vis plat,
 Iauz de choete et nes de chat,
 Boche fandue come los,
 Danz de sangler aguz et ros,
 Barbe noire, grenons tortiz,
 Et le manton aers au piz,
 Longue eschine, torte et boque.
 Apoitez fu sor sa maque . . . (295-308)

His hevyd, me thoght, was als grete
 Als of a rowncy or a nete;
 Unto his belt hang his hare,
 And efter þat byheld I mare.
 To his forhede byheld, I þan,
 Was bradder þan twa large span;
 He had eres als ane olyfant
 And was wele more þan geant.
 His face was ful brade and flat;
 His nese was cutted als a cat;
 His browes war like litel buskes,
 And his tethe like bare-tuskes.
 A ful grete bulge opon his bak
 (Thare was noght made withowten lac);
 His chin was fast until his brest;
 On his mace he gan him rest. (251-266)

And in order to outdo Chrétien, the author of *YG* transforms the rather pedestrian wild bulls tended by this creature into wild leopards, lions, and bears (240-241). The actual description of the spring in Calogrenant's story (410 ff. in Chrétien and 349 ff. in *YG*) is less abridged than usual, and the effect of Arthur's pouring water on it is exaggerated;

Et li rois por veoir la pluie
 Versa de l'iaue plain bacin
 Sor le perron desoz le pin,
 Et plut tantost mout fondelmant. (2218-2221)

The king kest water on þe stane;
 The storme rase ful sone onane
 With wikked weders, kene and calde,
 Als it was byforehand talde.
 The king and his men ilkane
 Wend þarwith to have bene slane. (1291-1296)

A predilection for the fantastic and supernatural is even more visible in *SP*, this despite the fact that the abridgement is even more drastic than in *YG*. *SP* abounds with witches and giants, liberally added to Chrétien. The Red Knight's mother, for example, is a "wyche" (826) whom Perceval kills by throwing her into the same fire in which he had grilled her son. Perceval's fight with the giant over the magic ring is another case in point. Given this tendency, it may be considered peculiar that the poet of *SP* abandoned all episodes connected with the Grail, potentially exploitable in this direction. However, it would seem that his lack of interest in matters spiritual is partly responsible for this excision.

Most scholars who have compared either of these Middle English romances with their Old French models have remarked that the characters are "flatter", with less psychological depth than in Chrétien. In *YG*, for example, the crisis which the hero undergoes has few of the moral and ethical implications that mark Chrétien's romance, and in *SP*, Perceval's progression, scarcely visible at all, stops with his attaining the status of a worldly knight, this due to the excision of the Grail theme. This effect of

“flattening” is in large part caused by the reduction in emphasis on matters of love and chivalry, ideals which form the very substance of Chrétien’s romances.¹³

Chrétien’s lament at the beginning of *Yvain* (12-32) for the good old days when the order of love was taken seriously by its servants is given rather short shrift in *YG*. Instead, the knights and ladies talk of physical prowess and hunting;

Fast þai carped and curtaysly
Of dedes of armes and of veneri
And of gude knightes þat lyfed þen,
And how men might þam kyndeli ken
By doghtines of þaire gude ded
On ilka syde, wharesum þai ycdc. (25-30)

Love is given only a token acknowledgement in l. 35: “For trowth and luf es al bylaft.” A similar tendency is evident in the clipping of the conversation between Yvain and Lunete and Yvain’s fretting from 246 lines (1260-1506) to 64 (839-908). In contrast to the subtle dialectic of Chrétien’s version, the English hero poses the problem in typically uncomplicated fashion:

Bot yit I wite hir al with wogh
Sen þat I hir lord slogh.
I can noght se by nakyn gyn,
How þat I hir luf sold wyn (895-898)

The description of the daughter of the lord of the castle of Pesme Avanture is transformed by Chrétien into a digression on how the God of Love would have renounced his divinity if he had seen her, become a man, and wounded himself with one of his own arrows (5374-5391). The English poet simply states that the girl was only fifteen, gracious, good, and fair (3091-3094).

Although much of the amorous activity in Chrétien’s *Perceval* is to be found in the Gauvain adventures completely omitted in *SP*, even in the *Perceval* part, a similar tendency can be noted to that discerned in *YG*. The brief indications given to *Perceval* by his mother as to how he should behave in female company (541-556) are omitted in the English version, where the advice is limited to a general recommendation to be moderate and generous ““Bothe in haulle and in boure”” (399). As regards *Perceval*’s arrival at Biaurepaire and his chaste night in bed with *Blanchefleur* (1699 ff.), not only is this toned down, but the sequence of events is also significantly changed. It has already been mentioned that the portrait of *Blanchefleur* is not present in *SP*, and her nightly visit to *Perceval*’s bed is also rendered unnecessary by having the hero arrive as a result of a request for aid (953 ff.). Moreover, their intimate dinner is interrupted by another fight, after which *Perceval* retires early in order to be in a suitable condition to deal with the sultan on the morrow (1211-1607).

Both English adaptors seem less interested in the finer points or courtly and chivalric behaviour than Chrétien de Troyes and their treatment of this may be said to be more realistic.¹⁴ Modes of address are generally less elaborate in *YG* and *SP*, and the conventions of hospitality, for instance, seem to be endowed with less ceremony. This second feature is visible in the two versions of Yvain's reception at the castle of Pehme Avature, twenty-five lines in the French text (5412-5437), compared with ten in the English (3101-3110). From *Perceval* and *SP*, the hero's arrival in Belrepeire and Maydenlande (*Perceval*, ll. 1699 ff. and *SP*, ll. 1301 ff.) will serve to illustrate the same tendency.

In response to Calogrenant's pouring water on the stone, Esclados le Roux reacts according to the book, as it were, by reproaching the intruder with not having challenged him first (491-496). In *YG*, this is turned into reported speech for the most part and Salados does not insist on the infringement of the rules of chivalry (409 ff.). Generally in Chrétien's romances, defeated opponents are taken prisoner or sent back to surrender to Arthur, and this is the case in *Perceval* with Anguingueron and Clamadeu in the Belrepeire episode (2166 ff.). In the equivalent passage in *SP*, however, the sultan Gollerothrame is unceremoniously beheaded (1649 ff.).

All of this bespeaks on the part of the two English poets a much less complicated and formalistic view of courtesy and chivalry. The most radical change in this respect is again to be found in *SP*, where not only is the hero's spiritual progress ignored, but his initiation into knighthood, such an important theme of Chrétien's work, is hardly even hinted at. The English *Perceval* seems to possess the requisite qualities of an English romance hero from the very start and needs no one to teach him the rules of knighthood or how to behave in battle. The idea that "nobility will out", certainly present in Chrétien, is taken quite literally by the English adaptor, who does not seem to regard guidance as necessary, or at least does not show it taking place.¹⁵

Calogrenant's story and Yvain's attempt to avenge him are in Chrétien both concerned with knightly honour and shame. The word "honte" is used at the beginning of the episode, where Calogrenant is said to be relating a story "Non de s'enor, mes de sa honte" (60); and at the end of his *récit* he concludes "Si m'an reving honteusemant" (560). Yvain says to Calogrenant: "J'irai vostre honte vangier" (589) and sets out determined to repeat the adventure "Jusqu'a tant que il an avra / Grant honte ou grant enor eüe" (720-721). At the beginning of *YG*, Colgrevaunce is simply said to be telling the other knights "of a stowre he had in bene" (61), and Yvain reproaches his cousin with not having told him this earlier: "For sertes I sold onone ryght / Have venged þe of þat ilk knyght. / So sal I yit, if þat I may" (463-465). Although this is certainly a matter of vengeance for the English hero, there is at no point any mention of shame. Vengeance is certainly also a major theme of *SP*.¹⁶

Honour can be made public in Chrétien by sending news of recent triumphs back to the court by various means. It has already been seen how the author of *SP* does not have Perceval send his defeated opponents to Arthur, and this lack of attention to the standard continental procedure following a combat may also be explained by the absence of a need to acquire honour in the eyes of the world and one's peers. In *Yvain*, the hero requests Gauvain's kin to go to court to inform their relation of what the Chevalier au Lion has achieved in freeing them from Harpin de la Montagne (4273-4303). In *YG* the request is missing.

Consideration for the feelings of others is generally regarded as an essential aspect of both courtesy and chivalry (insofar as these can be separated). Consequently, in Chrétien's romances, the motivation behind a knight's deeds is clearly a central issue, and the knight's duty to the oppressed and to the beloved are of paramount importance. Yvain's horrified reaction to Lunete's accusation that she will die on account of his criminal neglect is a good example of this:

Et il respont "Ja Deu ne place,
Que l'an por moi nul mal vos face!
Tant con je vive, n'ï morroiz!
Demain atandre me porroiz
Apareillié de ma puissance,
De metre an vostre delivrance
Mon cors si con je le doi fere." (3721-3727)

Here, regard for Lunete's well-being is mixed with feelings of knightly duty. In *YG*, the accent is slightly, but significantly, different:

He said, "Als I am trew knyght,
I sal be redy forto fyght
To-morn with þam al thre,
Leman, for þe luf of þe." (2189-2192)

It is the duty that is stressed in *YG*, not particularly consideration for the welfare of Lunete. Again, when Gauvain's relative is asked by Yvain about his joy and grief, he answers that he does not wish to burden his guest with his own troubles (3835-3845). Such courtly consideration is lacking in the corresponding speech in *YG* (2245 ff.). A comparable case in *Perceval* and *SP* is the scene in which Blanchefleur and the inhabitants of Belrepeire beg Perceval not to fight Clamadeu on the morrow (2622-2629); the more calculating Lufamour, on the other hand, is merely glad to have such help against the sultan (1302-1312). This does not mean, of course, that the Middle English Poets did not expect their audiences to take such consideration for granted, only that they do not seem to have any interest in presenting it directly. This has considerable implications for the social function of these romances, as will be seen below.

Clearly, all of the modifications analysed so far would have been dictated not so much by the poets' personal inclinations, but by the

demands of their audiences. In view of the distance, both in place and time, between Chrétien's romances and the Middle English versions, it is only to be expected that these will be quite different. The general trend of what has been shown so far, that is to say towards a faster moving, no-nonsense sort of romance, in which the subtle interplay between courtesy, chivalry, and love plays a subordinate role, might suggest a less aristocratic public, possibly with a smaller proportion of women in the audience. Simply put, it seems that we are dealing in *YG* and *SP* with a male-oriented society. This is particularly visible in a general switch of attention from women to men and a reduction in the submissiveness of men to women.

To take some details from *YG* first: at the beginning of the text, the knights are telling stories on their own initiative rather than having been summoned to do so by the ladies ("ou dames les apelerent", l. 10); when Arthur swears in the French text to visit the fountain, he does so on the souls of his father, his son and his mother (662-664), whereas the English Arthur swears on the soul of his father and, significantly, on his crown; Laudine's knights express their admiration of Yvain by saying that the Empress of Rome would be fortunate to be married to him (2064-2066), but the English poet simply says "Him semes to be an emperowre" (1204). All of these minor points contribute to the shift of interest away from women in the direction of men. Chrétien's scene in which the sisters of the Noire Espine take an active part in discussing the merits of their own cases (4759-4820) is modified in the English text so that they seem to have no say in the matter (2767-2800). The lord of the Castle of Pesme Avanture releases Yvain from his promise to return if he possibly can to marry his daughter as he does not hold her so cheap as to bestow her forcibly on him (5756-5770); in *YG*, the daughter is treated as if she were a commodity, and Yvain says he would never marry her even if he had to spend the rest of his life in prison, whereupon the lord grudgingly gives him leave to go (3323-3331).

Similar tendencies can be noted in *Perceval* and *SP*. Chrétien describes at the beginning of his romance how Perceval's mother swoons and eventually dies (622-625). In *SP* the mother shows no emotion at all, has much less power over Perceval, and lives to see him again (431-432). The outrageous behaviour of the Chevalier Vermeil in Chrétien is symbolised by his pouring wine over Guenièvre (956-967), whereas in the English romance, the aggressor simply rides off with the cup (617-624). Considerable attention is paid by Chrétien to the sufferings of the maiden of the tent at the hands of the Orgeuilleux de la Lande (3691 ff.), whilst the English poet does not really attempt to arouse the pity of his audience for the poor victim, simply stating: "A birde, brighteste of ble, / Stode faste bonden till a tre" (1829-1830).

In the English texts, men tend on the whole to be less submissive to women. In the opening scene of *YG*, for example, the Queen is treated less politely than in *Yvain*, and the knights seem to argue with her on equal

terms. Derek Pearsall has also pointed out that Yvain is generally less submissive to Alundyne than Yvain is to Laudine.¹⁷ Although Lunet, as Friedman and Harrington have noted, is the least changed of all the characters,¹⁸ her role and Yvain's dependence on her have both been reduced. Her relationship with the hero is less intimate and she treats him with a good deal more respect. After the scene in the French text in which Laudine's people have been frantically and unsuccessfully searching for the murderer of Esclados, Lunete returns to Yvain and addresses him thus:

“Mout ont par ceanz tanpesté
Et reverchié toz cez quachez
Plus menuëmant que brachez
Ne va traçant perdriz ou caille.
Peor avez eü sanz faille.” (1264-1268)

In *YG* this playful teasing is absent: “Sho [said], ‘Sir, how crto stad? / I hope ful wele pou has bene rad’” (843-844). And at the end of the romance, Yvain humbly proffers his thanks to Lunete in an appropriately courtly fashion (6695-6699). The English poet bluntly states: “So aþer was in oþer det” (3947). Perceval's first dealings with the damsel in the tent, however inept, are characterised by a desire to please her, just as his mother had taught him he should:

“Pucele, je vos salu,
Si con ma mere le m'aprist:
Ma mere m'anseigna et dist
Que les puceles saluasse,
An quel que leu que jes trovasse.” (682-685)

The English poet renders this unnecessary by having the girl remain asleep, Perceval's only thought being to exchange rings with her. Although this may not have been a prime consideration for him, the English poet's excision of many of the episodes of Chrétien's *Perceval* contributes to the overall effect of making knights less dependent on their ladies. Gauvain's adventures with the Male Pucelle are arguably the most important ones in this respect,¹⁹ but even within the Perceval adventures, the cutting of the meeting with his cousin (due to the omission of the Grail theme) spares Perceval a female rebuke.

This kind of male-oriented society portrayed in the Middle English romances is to all appearances a “conservative”, hierarchical one, in which all ranks receive the respect they are due in the natural order of things. A passage such as *Yvain*, ll. 42-48, in which Arthur is openly criticised by the knights, is toned down considerably in the English poem (47-52). Perceval's initial attitude towards Arthur is hardly respectful: “‘Cist rois ne fist chevalier onques. / Quant l'an n'an puet parole treire, / Comant porroit chevalier faire?’” (928-930). Despite Perceval's uncouthness at this point, the fact remains that the audience is being invited to laugh, partly at least,

at the King's expense. Moreover, Perceval is not very impressed by the superior social status of King and Queen:

Li vaslez ne prise une cive
 Quanque li rois li dit et conte;
 Ne de son duel ne de la honte
 La reïne ne li chaut il (968-971)

Something of the sort is apparent in the corresponding scene of *SP* (481 ff.), but Arthur is not shown in his traditional distracted state, another significant difference being that Kay has no role to play here and is not allowed to interfere with the King's business.

Respect for the servants is something else which is not present in *YG*. In the episode where the servants at the castle of Gauvain's relatives ask Yvain if he will please leave his lion outside, he refuses to do so, but seems to care sufficiently about the servants as human beings to reassure them that all will be well (3799-3801). This concern is absent in *YG*. It has already been seen, too, that Lunet is not allowed to be as disrespectful towards Yvain as Lunete is towards Yvain, and this has as much to do with her social status as her gender. Strangely, but perhaps as a result of the predominantly masculine interests of the poet and his audience, this hierarchical tendency is not found where relationships between two women of different social status are concerned. The social distance between Alundyne and Lunet seems to be shorter than that between Laudine and Lunete, their relationship being much more friendly and affectionate. When Lunete proposes to Laudine that she send for this knight who loves her, Laudine replies haughtily:

... "Par foi,
 Ensi le vuel et si l'otroi
 Et je l'avoie ja pansé
 Si con vos l'avez devisé,
 Et tot ainsi le ferons nos.
 Mes ci por quoi demorez vos?
 Alez! ja plus ne delaiiez,
 Si faites tant que vos l'aiez.
 Et je remanderai mes janz." (1869-1877)

In *YG*, the poet simply tells us: "Than was þe lady blith and glad. / Sho did als hir mayden bad" (1097-1098). Towards the end of the French romance, when Lunete is trying to persuade Laudine to take Yvain back (6527 ff.), the lively dialogue reveals much about the relationship between the two. Lunete, for example, speaks firmly to her mistress: "'De ceste chose conseillier / Vos covient, dame!', fet Lunete" (6556-6557); Laudine switches between the familiar ("'Tu,' fet la dame, 'qui tant sez. / Me di comant j'an panserai, / Et je a ton los an ferai,'" ll. 6576-6578) and the formal ("'Dameisele, car parlez d'el!'" l. 6593). The English adaptor creates a sense of comradeship between the two women by having Lunet use the first person plural: "'Now er we hard byset; / Madame, I ne wate what us es

best'" (3856-3857); in her reply Alundyne addresses her servant as "'Dere Lunet'" (3866).²⁰

Related to this strong sense of the established social order is a nationalistic feeling about both English poems, often expressed by means of boosting the role and status of King Arthur. It has already been seen that much of Chrétien's criticism of Arthur is missing in the English versions, and *YG* opens with much more assertive praise of him than is present in *Yvain*:

Arthur þe Kyng of Yngland,
 That wan al Wales with his hand
 And al Scotland, als sayes þe buke,
 And mani mo, if men wil luke,
 Of al knightes he bare þe pryse,
 In world was none so war ne wise:
 Trew he was in alkyn thung (7-13)

In the episode of the sister of the Noire Espine, the English poet adds a passage which seems to allude to English law of the period, and which is put in such a way as to strengthen the role of the King as lawgiver and to appeal to the audience's sense of national identity:²¹

This land was first, I understand,
 That ever was parted in Inland.
 Than said þe king, withow[te]n fail,
 For þe luf of þat batayl
 Al sisters þat sold efter bene
 Sold part þe landes þam bitwene. (3767-3772)

In *SP*, there are no such openly nationalistic passages, but the more favourable presentation of Arthur and Gawain suggests that the author did not want to present any specifically British heroes in a poor light. In addition, the transformation of Lufamour's enemies from wicked locals into Saracens also has been something of the national epic about it.

This last point provides the link to the final part of this article, as it seems to me that many of the differences discerned above between Chrétien's *Yvain* and *Perceval* on the one hand, and *YG* and *SP* on the other, point in the general direction of epic. In the rest of this article, I should like to look briefly at some of the more technical aspects of the texts, and particularly in the light of some basic differences between romance and epic as proposed by Hans Robert Jauss.²²

Jauss's approach to the problem of genres is, of course, only one of many and is hardly new, but it has not yet been applied to the medieval English situation, and I believe that it is well suited to explaining some of the characteristic features of the Middle English romances and the differences between them and the Old French models. It will also be clear that only a brief and preliminary application of Jauss's model to the Middle English romances is possible here.²³

In the article "Theorie der Gattungen und Literatur des Mittelalters," Jauss considers epic (the *chanson de geste*), romance (Arthurian romance),

and the novella (the *Decamerone*). This third genre will, for obvious reasons, not be taken into account in the following discussion. Jauss distinguishes four modalities in terms of which he describes the genres. These modalities are a) author and text; b) *modus dicendi*; c) structure and layers of meaning; d) *modus recipiendi* and social function. I shall now briefly look at the two Middle English romances with the aid of these modalities, following the divisions and sub-divisions as they are to be found in the article referred to above.²⁴ Chrétien will be taken as representative of the romance features as proposed by Jauss, which will therefore not be illustrated in detail.

1 *Author and Text* (Narration)

1.1. Singer (*Rhapsode*) versus Narrator.

In romance there is a writing poet and an unseen audience, the author stepping out from behind his material to act as a mediating narrator, whereas epic has an oral poet-performer and a listening audience, the author hiding behind his material so that the story seems to tell itself. In *YG* and *SP* interventions by the narrator are rare compared to Chrétien and largely restricted to one-line formulae, such as “Now rides Ywayn as ye sal here” (*YG*, l. 1975) or “I say yow, than certenly” (*SP*, l. 2275) or “And there was he slayne, I undirstonde” (*SP*, l. 2283). The minstrel’s *incipit* and *envoi* in both *YG* and *SP* are additions to the French romances and lie fairly and squarely in the mainstream of Middle English romance tradition; from the French point of view they belong to the epic rather than the romance.

1.2. Epic Objectivity versus Interpretation of Story.

In romance the narrator’s interventions serve to explain the *fabula*, whereas certain epic formulae (assertions of truthfulness, sharing the fate of the hero, epic anticipation) create an emotional unity between performer and audience. The move towards epic in this respect is particularly visible in *YG* and *SP* from the assertions of veracity, more frequent than in Chrétien. Examples are: “þe soth to say” (*YG*, ll. 15, 1605, 3997), “trewly to tell” (*YG*, l. 329), “for soth to tell” (*YG*, l. 1267), “als men says” (*SP*, l. 826), “I tell yow for certen” (*SP*, l. 1199), and “The certen sothe as I yow say” (*SP*, l. 1818).

1.3. Epic Distance: *Wie-Spannung* versus *Oh-überhaupt-Spannung*.

Although both romance and epic are related as events that have taken place in the distant past, the tension created in romance with respect to the expected outcome is still partly *whether* it will materialise, but in the epic, anticipation opens the possibility for the generation of “*how-tension*”. It has already been seen how the Middle English authors seem to make light

of the problems Chrétien creates for his heroes, and that Ywain and Perceval will achieve what the audience expects them to is a foregone conclusion. Friedman and Harrington have noted the reduction in suspense when *YG* is compared with *Yvain*, and this will automatically entail a reduction in the *Ob-Spannung*.²⁵ The modification made in *SP* is the more radical of the two, largely as a result of the hero's traditional epic death.

2 *Modus dicendi* (Forms of Representation)

2.1. Oral versus Written.

Romance is transmitted in writing, attains a more or less fixed form, and is intended to be read or read aloud, whereas epic is an oral (and possibly improvised) performance for a non-reading public. Clearly, neither *YG* or *SP* were improvised since they were adapted from Chrétien's two romances, but the manner in which they are presented may well be descended from an oral tradition.²⁶ This may be evident from the use of formulae noted on several occasions above and the minstrel's addresses to the audience. The two English texts are certainly less "literary" than their French models, and even the references to written sources (*YG*, ll. 9, 3209, 3761, and *SP*, ll. 567) sound like tags when compared, say, to Chrétien's allusions to the *conte* in *Perceval*, ll. 66-67, 709, and 6215).

2.2. Verse or Prose.

The normal form of the romance in French is octosyllabic rhyming couplets, that of the *chanson de geste* assonating *laissez* which allow for some improvisation. *YG* retains the form of its model, but *SP* is written in tail-line stanzas of sixteen lines of rather irregular metre, rhyming aaabccbbdddbeeeb, with frequent formulaic alliteration which points to a relationship with the English alliterative tradition, albeit a distant one, and possibly epic associations.

2.3. Style: *Sermo sublimis* versus *medius* versus *humilis*.

According to Jauss, the epic is written in a high style, the novella in a low, conversational style, and the romance in an intermediate one not generally suited to the description of everyday reality. Stylistic analysis of *YG* and *SP*, if carried out in detail, would not in this case show a movement towards epic, rather a downward movement in the direction of novella (or *fabliau*). This is particularly noticeable in the case of *SP*.

2.4. Closed versus Open.

The sequence of departure, self-contained adventures, and election to the Round Table, gives the story of the romance hero a "closed" appearance which does not require reference to prior or subsequent events; the story of the epic often lends itself to being turned into cycle form, having no definite

beginning or end. As romances usually deal with a single hero whose adventures end in happiness and stability, the story cannot really be continued, except by the introduction of a new hero. Even after the death of a hero (or before his birth) the story of an epic can often be continued with the same basic theme. The movement towards epic is particularly clear again in *SP*, where the hero saves the people of Maydenlande from the infidel and dies on a crusade for the sake of Christianity. This tendency is less visible in *YG*.

3 *The Structure and Levels of Meaning* (Unities of Representation)

3.1. Plot (*argumentum*): Epic versus Romance Event.

Happenings in romance, chance adventures leading to self-fulfilment, derive their unity from the figure of the exemplary hero, whilst the epic plot is unified by an objective, world-embracing event in which the hero represents the fate of his community. In both Middle English poems, material dealing with secondary characters is excised, thereby causing greater attention to be devoted to the hero and his actions, not his development in relation to others. It has also been seen to what extent the Middle English adaptors of Chrétien have nationalistic tendencies which as a result make the hero more of a representative of Arthurian (i.e. British) society. This movement is again more clearly seen in *SP*, where Perceval's actions have to be placed in the broader perspective of the struggle between Christianity and the Infidel, a central theme of epic. Moreover, Perceval is in *SP* related to Arthur and is therefore by definition a British hero.

3.2. Social Status of Characters: High, Middle, Low.

Both romance and epic are exclusively aristocratic (with the occasional stereotyped *vilain*), but whereas in romance there is a contrast between the inactive king and the active individual knight-hero, in epic the hierarchy is headed by an semi-devine king, followed by a select group of knights (for example, the *douze-pairs*), followed in turn by a larger group of mostly anonymous knights. The same hierarchy is seen in the pagan opposition. Ample evidence of this feature from *YG* and *SP* has been provided above: strengthening of the feudal hierarchy and glorification (but not deification) of the monarch is visible in both Middle English adaptations, but especially in *YG*. In *SP*, the hierarchy of the pagan opposition is headed by the Sultan, but not worked out in detail.

3.3. Represented Reality: Symbolic versus Exemplary.

Reality is transformed in romance into elements of a magical, often hostile, other world within the framework of an exemplary and stylised courtly society; in the epic a small number of symbols for the outside world frame the hero's deeds, and are differentiated by symbolic gestures or reinforced

by typological relationships. One of the most interesting aspects of the adaptation of *Yvain* and *Perceval* into Middle English was seen to be the increased emphasis put on magic and supernatural representations of hostility, although the final effect is sensational rather than mysterious. By and large, however, it is not really possible to discern a movement of this kind towards epic in *YG* and *SP*.

4 *Modus Recipiendi and Social Function*

4.1. *Res Gesta versus Res Ficta.*

Romance follows the fictional principle of the fairy tale in that the adventure should not be anything like reality, although the narrator may claim to have concealed a *sensus moralis* in the *res ficta*. Epic, on the other hand, claims historicity, and serves to commemorate deeds of the past; this claim is often strengthened by use of names or place-names familiar from national history. It has been seen how both Middle English adaptors reduce the *sensus moralis* of their poems when compared to Chrétien, and this is in itself, therefore, a step in the direction of epic. Despite the emphasis on the supernatural noted above, the world of both *YG* and *SP* comes closer to that of everyday reality than Chrétien's. Claims for the authenticity of the subject-matter have already been seen above (l. 2); in *YG*, the change of location from Carduel (*Yvain*, l. 7) to Cardiff (*YG*, l. 17) may be an attempt on the part of the English poet to strengthen the national historical background, and in *SP*, the introduction of the Saracens and the idea of the crusade is at least rooted in an historical phenomenon.

4.2. Reception: Admiration and Sympathy versus Entertainment and Edification.

The ideal adventures of romance not only permit the enjoyment of a fiction already open to irony, but also have a didactic function in terms of the courtly ethic. Heroic ideality, which excludes ineluctable tragedy and liberating comedy, implies by the polarity of admiration and sympathy that it can be imitated. As far as the Middle English romances are concerned, these two tendencies do not seem to be mutually exclusive. Due to a lessened emphasis on the crises in the life of the hero and his own development, the English Yvain and Perceval certainly become objects of admiration and imitation rather than vehicles for the teaching of courtly virtues. Most of the irony which has recently come to be recognised as a characteristic of Chrétien is missing in the English romances. On the other hand, *SP* in particular contains a good deal of comedy.

4.3. Social function: Collective Memory versus Initiation.

The romance's primary function of initiation into courtly life and courtly

love still takes priority over the secondary function of entertainment, however. Epic is a primary form of the transmission of history for non-readers in which national history is transposed into an ideal past and elevated into an epic-mythical system for explaining the world. Clearly, the less edificatory nature of the Middle English romances in terms of reception is related to a similar change in social function. In Jauss's terms, the priorities of the two functions of romance seem to have been reversed in the Middle English texts, probably due to a socially more diversified audience than that of the French poems.²⁷ The changes noted in 4.1 and elsewhere above suggest a movement in the direction of collective memory, although neither *YG* nor *SP*, of course, actually claims to retell national history for a non-literate audience. It might also be possible to argue that the less complicated and problematic treatment of knighthood, and in particular the clear opposition of good and evil in *SP*, are grounds for thinking that the Middle English poets and their audiences shared a simple and dualistic view of the world.

The general implications of the above testing of *YG* and *SP* against Jauss's *Kommunikationssystem* of medieval literary genres will, I hope, be clear. The Middle English poets have turned Chrétien's *Yvain* and *Perceval*, classic examples of the Old French romance, into something approaching epic. Not that *YG* and *SP* could ever be considered epics proper, of course, rather that they might be termed *epic romances*, since they embody many of the features characteristic of the epic whilst retaining a basic affiliation to the romance.²⁸ Even this modified conclusion must be subject to caution, however, as Jauss's model takes as its point of departure literature in the romance languages and more particularly French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Dorothy Everett, for example, in a now classic article on Middle English romance, argues that the distinction between *roman courtois* and *chanson de geste* is more useful for students of Old French literature than Middle English.²⁹ According to her, Middle English authors adapted the *chanson de geste* in much the same way as they did anything else from Old French, a so-called Charlemagne romance being of much the same kind as an Arthurian one; the French distinction is thereby eliminated. The proper comparison in Middle English is therefore between romance and epic poetry in general rather than between *roman courtois* and *chanson de geste* in particular. However, given the indisputable Old French background to much of Middle English literature, it can be argued that the more specific French distinction is of necessity valid.³⁰

A model based on the corpus of Middle English literature of the fourteenth century would certainly differ from the French one in a number of respects as the relationships between various kinds of literary work will to some extent be dependent on the chronological, geographical, and linguistic co-ordinates of a given corpus.³¹ The very fact that neither of the Middle English texts discussed here can be considered romances or epics

proper in Jauss's terms argues strongly in favour of such a model, and the construction of a Middle English *Kommunikationssystem* along Jaussian lines would almost certainly prove to be of some general assistance to scholars in their frequent discussions of Middle English genres. The advantage of this would clearly be the possibility of discussing Middle English romance on its own terms rather than those of the continent and of testing the results obtained by means of the comparison. At best, it might attack the root of the difficulty of classifying Middle English romances, caused as it probably is by the failure of Middle English literature to conform to the genre-pattern of Old French. At the very least, it might serve to clear away some *idées reçues* and gain for Jauss's work the recognition it deserves amongst non-Romanists. For the time being, the present article may have put flesh on the bones of some old generalisations about two Middle English romances which bear witness once again to the extraordinary legacy of Chrétien de Troyes.

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Notes

* I should like to thank my former student, Christian Wijffels, who did a good deal of the groundwork for this study.

1. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrestien bis Froissart* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980).

2. Details of manuscripts of Chrétien are given by Alexandre Micha, *La Tradition manuscrite des romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris, 1939; rpt. Geneva: Droz, 1966). The popularity of the Yvain story in England is further attested by a number of misericords depicting the hero and his horse trapped in the portcullis at Laudine's castle. See Nicolas Jacobs and A.V.C. Schmidt, *Middle English Romances* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 2 vols., II, p. 11.

3. The standard editions are now *Yvain and Gawain*, eds. Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964) and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, ed. J. Campion and F. Holthausen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1913).

4. *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), and Renaut de Beaujeu, *Le Bel Inconnu*, ed. G. Perrie Williams (Paris: Champion, 1929).

5. Both English poems are printed in F. Madden, *Sir Gawayne, A Collection of Ancient Romance Poems*, etc. (Edinburgh/London, 1839; rpt. New York: AMS, 1971); the French text is edited in its various redactions by William Roach, *Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1949-1955), 3 vols.

6. The received view is that *SP* is not directly based on Chrétien. See, for example, Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 101, or Karl Heinz Göller, *König Arthur in der englischen Literatur des späten Mittelalters* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963), p. 84. However, this view seems to be based on the assumption that the English poet could not possibly have made such radical alterations to Chrétien's text. See now David C. Fowler, "Le Conte du Graal and Sir Perceval of Galles," *CLS*, XII (1975), 5-20, and Keith Busby, "Sir Perceval of Galles, Le Conte du Graal and La Continuation-Gauvain: The Methods of an English Adaptor," *EA*, 31 (1978), 198-202.

7. I have not yet been able to consult Tony Hunt's "The Value of Adaptation: *Yvain and Gawain*," announced as forthcoming in n. 25 to his useful "The Medieval Adaptations of Chrétien's *Yvain*: A Bibliographical Essay," in *An Arthurian Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Lewis Thorpe*, ed. Kenneth Varty (Glasgow: French Department, 1980), pp. 203-213.

8. I refer to *Der Löwenritter (Yvain)*, ed. Wendelin Foerster (Halle, 1887: rpt. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1965), and *Der Percevalroman*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Halle: Niemeyer, 1932).

9. Whilst some of the major aspects of the English poet's treatment of Chrétien has been noted by earlier scholars, notably Friedman and Harrington (ed. cit.) for *YG* and Fowler (art. cit.) for *SP*. I repeat some of their evidence here for the sake of completeness and the coherence of my argument. Most of my textual data, however, has not been presented elsewhere.

10. Alice Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth Century French Literature. An Aspect of the Stylistic Originality of Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva: Droz, 1965).

11. So popular was this portrait that it was reproduced verbatim by the author of the fabliau *Guillaume au faucon*, ed. T.B.W. Reid in *Twelve Fabliaux* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1958), II, 67-119. See Reid's note to these lines and my "Courtly Literature and the Fabliaux: Some Instances of Parody," *ZrPh*, 102 (1986) 67-87, 81-82.

12. See Joerg O. Fichte, "The Middle English Arthurian Verse Romance: Suggestions for the Development of a Literary Typology," *DVLS*, 55 (1981), 566-590, pp. 584-585.

13. See Fichte, pp. 577 and 583.

14. On the realism of *YG*, see John Finlayson, "Yvain and Gawain and the Meaning of Adventure," *Anglia*, 87 (1969), 312-337, p. 336.

15. Fichte, art. cit., p. 577. Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), p. 129, considers the suppression of individual development and values in *YG* as being due to the "popular" nature of the romance.

16. Scholars are now generally agreed that the major theme of *YG* is *trowth* in its various aspects. See Gayle K. Hamilton, "The Breaking of Troth in Yvain and Gawain," *Medaevaiva*, II (1976), 111-135, Jacobs and Schmidt, *op. cit.*, II, p. 12, and Fichte, art. cit., pp. 513-515. On vengeance as a theme of *SP*, see Fowler, art. cit., pp. 12-15.

17. Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 146.

18. Ed. cit., p. xxxii.

19. See my *Gauvain Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), pp. 108 ff.

20. On *ye* and *thou* in *YG*, see Friedman and Harrington's note to l. 86.

21. Mehl, loc. cit., and Friedman and Harrington, p. xxvi and note to ll. 3757-3762.

22. Hans Robert Jauss, "Epos und Roman: eine vergleichende Betrachtung an Texten des XII. Jahrhunderts," *Nachrichten der Giessener Hochschulgesellschaft*, 31 (1962), 76-92, rpt. in idem, *Alterität und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 1977), pp. 310-326, and especially "Theorie der Gattungen und Literatur des Mittelalters," in *Grundriss der romanischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, I (Heidelberg: Winter, 1968), pp. 103-138, rpt. in *Alterität und Modernität*, pp. 327-358.

23. Fichte, art. cit., p. 569, refers to Jauss *en passant* but does not make extensive use of his model.

24. Pp. 114-118 (pp. 334-338 of the rpt.).

25. Friedman and Harrington, ed. cit., p. xxii.

26. On formulaic language and presentation, see Fichte, pp. 587-588. According to Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1978), p. 18, *YG* and *SP* contain an average level of formulae.

27. I agree with Fichte, art. cit., p. 589, when he suggests that *delectare* rather than *docere* was the primary concern of the authors of Middle English romance. Only a universal moral message applicable to mankind in general was intended.

28. The term "epic romance" has already been used by Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *MS*, 27 (1965), 91-116.

29. Dorothy Everett, "A Characterization of the English Medieval Romance," *E&S*, 15 (1929), rpt. in idem, *Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), 1-22, pp. 19-21.

30. See John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," *Chaur*, 15 (1980), 44-62 and 168-181, esp. pp. 50-52. But Fichte is also certainly right to point out that Middle English narrative literature has in any case a tendency to mix literary genres.

31. For a specific instance, see Heinz Bergner, "Das Fabliau in der mittelenglischen Literatur," *Sprachkunst*, III (1072), pp. 298-312, and Keith Busby, "Conspicuous by its Absence: The English Fabliau," *DQR*, 12 (1982), 30-41.