X

The Romance: II

iii. *The Matter of France*

When we turn to the Matter of France we are met by a slight anomaly. Considering the Continental possessions and the long and close association of the English nobility with France, one might expect considerable interest in a body of legends centering in the French court and in important Carolingian families. Instead we find only limited representation of this great collection of stories, and those which are found in English versions seem to be written without special enthusiasm. It would appear that the political rivalry between the two countries which had developed by the time romances in any number were being written in English had dampened the interest in material which centered in the doings of French personages. In any case the national appeal which such stories had in France was lacking in England.

Chanson de Geste

The French *chansons de geste,* which included more than one hundred poems, were recognized not long after 1200 as falling into three general groups.[1] The most famous is the *geste du roi,* the epics more or less directly connected with Charlemagne, in many of which he appears as the champion of Christendom in wars against the infidel. Of these the best known is the *Chanson de Roland.* A second group is concerned with his struggles with his vassals. The epics of this group constitute the *geste de Doon de Mayence,* so called from the supposed ancestor of the rebels. The third concerns the adventures and conquests of William of Orange and members of his family. This group likewise takes its name from the legendary progenitor of the family and is known as the *geste de Garin de Monglane.* While each of these branches of the French epic has many points of interest, not all are represented in English. Indeed the only Charlemagne romances that have come to us in English verse belong to the cycle of the king, the *geste du roi.*[2]

[1] The classification is that of Bertran de Bar-sur-Aube, the author of two such poems, *Girart de Vienne* and *Aymeri de Narbonne.* In the former (after 1205) he says:

> N'ot que trois gestes en France la garnie . . .
> Du roy de France est la plus seignorie,
> Et l'autre apres, bien est droiz qui jeu die,
> Fu de Doon a la barbe florie,
> Cil de Maience qui molt ot baronnie . . .
> La tierce geste, qui molt fist a prisier,
> Fu de Garin de Monglenne au vis fier. (lines 11-47.)

[2] This is not the place to enter into the vexed question of the origin of the French epic. The most popular explanation in recent years is that of Joseph Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*

Song of Roland

Among these the Middle English *Song of Roland* [3] stands somewhat apart. Preserved in a single MS, it tells the famous story of Roland's last stand in 1049 four-stress lines rimed in couplets. When it breaks off Roland is just about to blow the blast on his horn that will summon Charlemagne. In spite of its rough versification and many careless rimes it manages a monotonous succession of individual combats with vigor and considerable variety. The poem naturally suffers by comparison with the great French epic on which it is based, but it does not entirely deserve the harsh words which it usually receives. Except for the late *Rauf Coilyear* ("Ralph the Collier"),[4] in which Charlemagne *incognito* is entertained by a peasant, with humorous consequences, the remaining Charlemagne romances fall into two classes, a Ferumbras group and an Otuel group.

The Ferumbras Group

The Ferumbras group treats the incidents found in two French *chansons de geste*, the *Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*, which in versions differing but slightly from those that are preserved seem to be the direct sources of the English romances. *The Sowdone* [i.e., Sultan] *of Babylone* [5] tells first how Laban (usually Balan) with the help of his son Ferumbras, sacks Rome, gets possession of the cross, the crown of thorns, and the nails of the Crucifixion, and sends them to Spain. The second part covers rapidly the incidents more fully treated in *Sir Ferumbras*.[6] Here Charlemagne's army, having come to Spain to punish the Saracens and recover the sacred relics, is met by Ferumbras, a formidable knight twenty feet tall. He is conquered in single combat by Oliver and becomes Christian, thereafter fighting on the Christian side. Oliver, on his way back to camp, is taken captive by a

(4v, Paris, 1908-13; 2ed., 1914-21). Recognizing in many of the *chansons de geste* the prominent notice taken of churches and monasteries along the great pilgrim routes of the Middle Ages, he suggested that these churches furnished the jongleurs with historical facts and traditions to be worked up into poems. In this way any claim to prominence which a church had because of the historic importance of its founder, the possession of the tomb or relics of a heroic figure, or the like, would be enhanced and more widely disseminated. The acceptance of this theory as a comprehensive explanation of the origin of the *chanson de geste* is not unattended by difficulties, although as a method of accounting for individual poems it is at times very convincing. Various critiques and correctives of Bédier's views are contained in the articles of F. Lot. For a bibliography and summary of Lot's position see E. J. Healy, "The Views of Ferdinand Lot on the Origins of the Old French Epic," *SP*, XXXVI (1939). 433-465. The older work of Léon Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises* (4v, 2ed, Paris, 1878-82) is still of value as a descriptive survey. For an excellent brief account of the many theories of the origin of the Old French epic see K. Voretzsch, *Introduction to the Study of Old French Literature* (Eng. trans., 1931), pp. 89-99.

[3] Edited by S. J. Herrtage (1880; *EETSES*, 35).

[4] Written in Scotland *c.* 1475 or slightly before. Edited by S. J. Herrtage (1882; *EETSES*, 39); William H. Browne (Baltimore, 1903). See also H. M. Smyser, "*The Taill of Rauf Coilyear* and Its Sources," *Harvard Studies & Notes in Phil. & Lit.*, XIV (1932). 135-150.

[5] Edited by Emil Hausknecht (1881; *EETSES*, 38). It is in quatrains of alternate three- and four-stress verses. For a discussion of its source see the careful study of H. M. Smyser, "The Sowdon of Babylon and Its Author," *Harvard Studies & Notes in Phil. & Lit.*, XIII (1931). 185-218, supplemented and corrected by the same author's "A New Manuscript of the *Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*," *ibid.*, XIV (1932). 339-349.

[6] Known as the Ashmole version to distinguish it from that in the Fillingham MS. The edition in *EETSES*, 34 is printed in long lines which disguise its true metrical form. It is really in 10,540 verses, of which the first 6820 are in quatrains (*abab*), the last 3720 in romance sixes (*aab ccb*). Fragments of the author's original draft are preserved, written on the back of two documents belonging to the diocese of Exeter at the end of the fourteenth century. The romance was apparently composed at about the same time and place.

Saracen force, and the greater part of the story grows out of his capture and the circumstance that the Sultan's beautiful daughter, Floripas, is in love with another of Charlemagne's knights, Guy of Burgundy. Her determined and resourceful personality plays a large part in the ultimate victory of the Christians and the recovery of the relics. Needless to say, she receives her reward in marriage to Guy, after being duly baptized. It is a pity that the unique manuscript in which *Sir Ferumbras* is preserved has lost a leaf or two at the beginning and end, for it is much the best of the English Charlemagne romances. The author was a conscious artist and took obvious pains with his work. It is full of effective scenes and nice touches. Incidentally it is almost the only case in which any part of an English romance has come down in the author's autograph. By comparison the recently recovered Fillingham *Firumbras*[7] seems lacking in distinction. The same incidents are treated more briefly by one who seems to be telling a story without being a storyteller.

The Otuel Group

The Otuel group consists of five romances. *Roland and Vernagu*,[8] in tail-rime stanzas, is full of wild statements and childish exaggeration. The earliest part relates the circumstances under which Charlemagne comes to the aid of the Patriarch of Jerusalem and receives the crown of thorns, the arm of St. Simeon, Our Lady's smock, and many other relics. His invasion of Spain is like a triumphal march, after his prayers have caused the walls of one or two stubborn cities to fall. The romance takes its name from the latter part in which his douzepers are challenged by a forty-foot Saracen named Vernagu. After Ogier and several other paladins who undertake to fight him are picked up by Vernagu and carried off under his arm to prison, Roland disposes of him although he barely escapes the same ignominious treatment. The romance is incomplete, and as it breaks off amid the general rejoicing, it seems to be about to proceed to the story of Otuel which we have in other Middle English versions. *The Sege of Melayne*[9] (Milan) may have been intended to form another introduction to the Otuel story, although nothing corresponding to it in French literature is known. It relates a very unhistorical incident but tells its story well. Its most significant feature is the character of Archbishop Turpin, who abandons his priestly robes and conducts himself with great credit on the battlefield.

Three romances tell the story of Otuel proper. His reason for challenging Roland is partly the fact that Vernagu, whom Roland had killed, was his uncle. They all tell the same story with slight variations. Otuel in the midst of his single combat with Roland is converted to Christianity when the

[7] So called from the owner of the MS at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Lost for a hundred years, it was acquired by the British Museum in 1907 (Add. MS 37, 492). Edited by Mary I. O'Sullivan (1935; *EETS*, 198).

[8] *EETSES*, 39. See Ronald N. Walpole, *Charlemagne and Roland: A Study of the Source of Two Middle English Metrical Romances,* Roland and Vernagu *and* Otuel and Roland (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944; *Univ. of Calif. Pub. in Mod. Phil.*, xxi, No. 6).

[9] *EETSES*, 35. It is in twelve-line tail-rime stanzas of the late fourteenth century. The dialect of the original was northern, though it is preserved in a Midland copy.

Holy Ghost descends in the form of a dove and settles on his helmet. King Charles welcomes him to his company and promises him the hand of his daughter, Belesant. After he has accompanied Charlemagne on his expedition to Spain and contributed his share to the victory of the Christians, he marries Belesant and becomes lord of Lombardy. The oldest version in English is the *Otuel* in four-stress couplets preserved in the Auchinleck MS.[10] It is without much merit. Somewhat better is the *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne*[11] preserved in the same manuscript as the *Sege of Melayne.* It has more minstrel vigor. Like the *Sege of Melayne* it is in tail-rime stanzas and was composed in the north. The third romance, the Fillingham *Otuel and Roland,*[12] is probably a continuation of *Roland and Vernagu* and differs from the other Otuel romances in carrying on the story for another thousand lines with material drawn from Pseudo-Turpin.[13] In brief form the addition recounts Charlemagne's victories over the Saracen Ebrahim and the King of Navarre and concludes with Roland's death at Roncevaux. All three Otuel romances have a number of peculiar features in common and even individual lines or short passages. Although they diverge widely enough to preclude the possibility of mutual dependence, they are probably all based ultimately upon an English romance now lost.

Religious Interest in Charlemagne Romances

The interest in the Charlemagne romance in England seems to have been mainly pietistic—the glorification of the Christian faith. The Fillingham *Otuel* opens with a demand for attention "in the worchype of ihesu cryst," and the *Ferumbras* in the same manuscript ends with a promise of one hundred days' pardon to all who listen to the story "with gode devocyoun." *The Sowdone of Babylone* begins with a homiletic opening, and the rough draft of *Sir Ferumbras* was begun on the back of two ecclesiastical documents. Both Ferumbras and Otuel, the two chief Saracen champions, are converted, and there are many cases of divine intervention. In the *Sege of Melayne* the militant bishop Turpin, although somewhat melodramatic and blustering, is a truly heroic figure and certainly the main character. The subject of the Sultan of Babylon-Ferumbras romances is the loss and recovery of the Crown of Thorns and other sacred relics, supposedly given by Charlemagne to the church of St. Denis. Indeed these romances constitute a kind of Carlovingian counterpart of the Grail theme in Arthurian romance, with Roland and Oliver answering to Perceval and Gawain in Chrétien. Judged by both choice of subject and treatment the English Charlemagne

[10] *EETSES,* 39.

[11] *EETSES,* 35.

[12] Ed. Mary I. O'Sullivan, *Firumbras and Otuel and Roland* (as above, note 7). The *Roland and Vernagu* and the *Otuel and Roland* are often given the group title *Charlemagne and Roland.* See the important studies of Ronald N. Walpole, *Charlemagne and Roland: A Study of the Sources of Two Middle English Romances,* Roland and Vernagu *and* Otuel and Rolnad (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944; *Univ. of Calif. Pub. in Mod. Phil.,* Vol. XXI, No. 6, pp. 385-452), and H. M. Smyser, "*Charlemagne and Roland* and the Auchinleck MS," *Speculum,* XXI (1946). 275-288.

[13] A spurious *Historia Caroli Magni et Rotholandi,* written in the twelfth century and fathered on Archbishop Turpin. The latest edition is that of H. M. Smyser, *The Pseudo-Turpin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937).

romances seem, with one or two exceptions, to be a group in which the missionary spirit is made to work through minstrel recitation.

iv. *The Matter of Britain*

The development of the Arthurian legend up to its first appearance in English in Layamon's *Brut,* while encumbered with numerous vexed questions, is not without a recognizable continuity.[14] Now, so far as England is concerned, that continuity is broken, for English romances on Arthurian subjects do not begin to appear until about 1300 and in spite of the interval of but a century that divided them from Layamon, they seem to be separated, generally speaking, by a much wider gulf. The reason is not far to seek. Arthurian romance enjoyed its great creative period in the latter part of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, particularly in France and Germany. It was the period of Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Gottfried von Strassburg, and others only less great. As the thirteenth century wore on, the impulse lost some of its force. The English Arthurian romances follow later and, since their sources are nearly all French, reflect this earlier development. But to read them without knowing their French background is like seeing a play in which we have missed the second act.[15] It might seem reasonable to expect that the English romances, built on so solid a French foundation, would reach an equally high level. Unfortunately, the great days of medieval romance were past, and English poets, with a few notable exceptions, were unable to recapture the spontaneity and fire of their Continental predecessors.

English Arthurian Romances Late and Derivative

Romances of Arthur

It is one of the distinctions of Chrétien that he got away from the biographical or compendious type of romance found, for example, in the *Roman d'Alexandre* or *Bevis of Hampton* and confined himself to a single episode or closely related group of episodes in his hero's career. Later Arthurian romance generally follows this pattern.[16] There are accordingly almost no English romances which attempt to cover the whole life of Arthur. There is a short poem of 642 lines, probably written in the second half of the fourteenth century, to which the name *Arthur*[17] has been given. It is of slight value and would scarcely deserve mention if it were not the only example of this inclusive type. Elsewhere we have only romances on certain aspects of Arthur's career, or on the adventures of individual knights of the Round Table, or on themes such as the history of the Holy Grail.

[14] See ch. VIII. It should be remembered that Layamon's *Brut* is a translation of Wace and therefore represents the state of Arthurian development prior to Chrétien.

[15] For the linguistic conditions that account for the lateness of English romance see above, p. 111.

[16] In thirteenth-century France the separate stories were again combined into long composites, this time intended for reading rather than recitation. These were in prose. The best known is the Vulgate Cycle generally attributed in the manuscripts, though quite falsely, to Walter Map. Malory's *Morte Darthur* is an example of such a composite in English.

[17] *EETS,* 2. It is incorporated in a Latin chronicle of the kings of Britain. It traces briefly Arthur's life from birth to death. From the circumstance that the narrator pauses every hundred lines and bids the listener to say a paternoster one must assume a clerical origin.

and Merlin The early life of Arthur is intimately associated with the figure of Merlin. It was through Merlin's magic that Uther Pendragon gained access to Ygerne the night Arthur was begotten. His advice and supernatural powers are helpful to Arthur on many occasions from the time the young prince pulls the sword from the stone and becomes king until he has emerged successfully from his contests with the rebels at home and his enemies abroad. This phase of Arthurian story is told in a romance of nearly ten thousand lines, called *Arthur and Merlin,* written about 1300.[18] It is not an inspired production; indeed it becomes rather tedious with its endless detail of battles and combats and its particularity concerning the numbers in each army and division and petty band. It is evidently based on a French source—variously referred to as the *Brut,* "the romance," or simply "the book"—apparently in verse and similar in content to the French prose *Merlins.*

Gawain Gawain's early adventures, largely military, constitute a major element in the romance just spoken of. His various exploits were destined to become the most popular of the subjects from which English poets chose their themes. A dozen romances, many of them short and rather late, attest his continued popularity. The greatest, of course, is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* more fully discussed among the works of the *Pearl* poet.[19] Admirably smooth in style and narrative technique is *Ywain and Gawain* [20] (*c.* 1350), in which Gawain and the hero fight a drawn battle, each ignorant of the other's identity. It is an adaptation of Chrétien's *Yvain* slightly condensed. Further evidence of Gawain's preëminence in popular favor is the fact that his son is made the hero of a romance, *Libeaus Desconus* (The Fair Unknown).[21] In this story Gingelein, the unknown and untried knight, undertakes to free the Queen of Sinadoun from captivity and enchantment. He succeeds, after preliminary encounters with sundry knights and giants, and in the end weds the lady.[22]

Lancelot Lancelot is the subject of only one English romance, the late-fifteenth-century *Lancelot of the Laik.*[23] It tells of his part in the war between Arthur

[18] Eugen Kölbing, *Arthour and Merlin, nach der Auchinleck-HS, nebst zwei Beilagen* (Leipzig, 1890; *Altenglische Bibliothek,* IV).

[19] See below, pp. 236.

[20] Ed. Gustav Schleich, *Ywain and Gawain* (Oppeln, 1887).

[21] Ed. Max Kaluza (Leipzig, 1890; *Altenglische Bibliothek,* V). The source is a French romance closely resembling *Le Bel Inconnu* (ed. G. P. Williams, Paris, 1929; *CFMA,* 38). See further Wm. Schofield, *Studies on the Libeaus Desconus* (Boston, 1895); *Harvard Studies & Notes in Phil. & Lit.,* IV.).

[22] Most of the Gawain romances can be found in Sir Frederic Madden, *Syr Gawayne* (London, 1839; *Bannatyne Club,* LXI). For other editions see Wells and the *CHEL.* These include *The Green Knight,* a fifteenth-century retelling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; The Turk and Gawain,* in which a more primitive form of the same story can be recognized; *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* which treats the temptation part of the story in a variant form. *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*—there is a modernization by George Brandon Saul (1934)—is a version of the story, so beautifully told by the Wife of Bath, of the knight and the loathly lady. In the *Geste of Sir Gawain* the hero, surprised in his love-making, is forced to fight the lady's father and brothers. His reputation for valor and fine courtesy is maintained in *Golagrus and Gawain,* involving an expedition to the Holy Land; his generosity is featured in *The Awntyrs (Adventures) of Arthur,* where an adventure of Gawain is loosely combined with a religious theme better known in *The Trental of St. Gregory.*

[23] There are several editions, the most useful being that of W. W. Skeat (1865; *EETS,* 6).

and Galiot (Galehault), following the French prose *Lancelot*, and doubtless ended with Guinevere's acceptance of him as her lover, although this part of the text is missing. In spite of some vigorous battle scenes, in which both Gawain and Lancelot distinguish themselves, it is a bookish production with a tedious prologue which is not fully redeemed by some interesting Chaucerian echoes, and the story pauses in the middle while Arthur receives with more patience than the reader a seven-hundred-line sermon on the duties of kingship.[24] The author was a Scot who affected certain dialectal traits of Southern English. While this is our sole Lancelot romance so far as title goes, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* [25] (*c.* 1400) is really concerned chiefly with Lancelot's adventures, his love for the queen, their final parting, and his death. It takes its name from the latter half when the lovers are betrayed by Agravain and Arthur makes war on Lancelot. It is in the midst of this struggle that Arthur is forced by Mordred's treason to return home and later receives his death wound. The narrative is terse and the action rapid. The *Morte Arthur* is the most ballad-like of the longer English romances. It is to be sharply distinguished from the romance of similar title, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (*c.* 1360).[26] The latter is the story of Arthur's Roman campaign, which in this romance is interrupted by Mordred's treason. Unlike the stanzaic tale, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* makes no mention of Arthur's being carried off by boat to be healed of his wounds. He here dies a mortal's death and is buried at Glastonbury. The romance is found in a MS copied by Robert Thornton *c.* 1430-40, but recent discoveries make it clear that in Thornton's text the original has been altered and shortened.[27] That original was undoubtedly Malory's source for the episode in the *Morte Darthur* (Book v), paraphrased and severely condensed. The alliterative *Morte Arthure* is remarkable for its careful workmanship and artistic elaboration. On various occasions the author lets his pen flow—the farewell scene between Arthur and Guinevere, Arthur's banquet, his fight with the giant, his dream, his final battle—and the result is a fullness of treatment and richness of detail rare in the romances of England. The narrative is that of a vigorous and genuinely gifted poet.

Morte Arthur

Two of the most popular subjects of the Arthurian cycle in the Middle Ages, the Perceval-Grail theme and the Tristan story, receive but little

Perceval

[24] On the basis of this passage a date after 1482 has been suggested. See Bertram Vogel, "Secular Politics and the Date of *Lancelot of the Laik*," *SP*, XL (1943). 1-13.

[25] The most accessible editions are those of J. Douglas Bruce (1903; *EETSES*, 88) and Samuel B. Hemingway (Boston, 1912). On the interesting question of the relation of this poem to Books XX and XXI of Malory, see Bruce, "The Middle English Metrical Romance *Le Morte Arthur* (Harleian MS 2252): Its Sources and the Relation to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Anglia*, XXIII (1900). 67-100.

[26] The best editions are those of E. Brock (1871, *EETS*, 8), Mary M. Banks (1900), and Erik Björkman (Heidelberg, 1915). S. O. Andrew, "The Dialect of *Morte Arthure*," *RES*, IV (1928). 418-423, argues convincingly that the original dialect was Northwest Midland. On the sources see R. H. Griffith, "Malory, Morte Arthure, and Fierabras," *Anglia*, XXXII (1909). 389-398, and Tania Vorontzoff, "Malory's Story of Arthur's Roman Campaign," *MA*, VI (1937). 99-121. The latter is a corrective to P. Branscheid, "Über die Quellen des stabreimenden Morte Arthure," *Anglia Anzeiger*, VIII (1885). 179-236, meritorious for its day and still useful.

[27] E. V. Gordon and E. Vinaver, "New Light on the Text of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *MA*, VI (1937). 81-98.

attention from English poets. *Sir Perceval of Gales* (*Wales*),[28] in sixteen-line stanzas linked by conscious repetition, tells a part of the story found in Chrétien's *Perceval*. Perceval, reared in the forest in ignorance of knighthood, is here even more the rustic than usual, but shows his ability by killing the Red Knight and other opponents, rescues the Lady Lufamour from her Saracen suitor, and marries her. In the end he is happily reunited with his mother. There is no Grail quest; the Grail is not even mentioned. The English romance preserves the Perceval story in a distinctly primitive form, and although the question has been much discussed, it is doubtful if the poem owes anything to Chrétien's romance or its continuations.[29] The quest of the Holy Grail is not treated in any Middle English romance outside of Malory. But quite early an attempt was made to account for the Grail and its mystical history. This appears in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* (see p. 141) and in greatly expanded form in the Vulgate *Estoire del Saint Graal*.[30] A brief English romance in 709 alliterative lines, *Joseph of Arimathie*[31] (*c.* 1350), tells the early part of the story, and a century later a London skinner, Henry Lovelich, told it at great length in a poem which goes by the name of *The History of the Holy Grail*.[32] The story of Tristan and Iseult comes off still worse at the hands of English poets. The only separate treatment of the theme (i.e., outside of Malory) is a northern poem of about 1300 called *Sir Tristrem*.[33] It is written in a curious eleven-line stanza in which most lines have three stresses. The effect of the verse is quite staccato and the narrative is equally so. Although the poet contrives to tell the story in most of its incidents—from the birth of the hero, his adventures at the court of King Mark and in Ireland, his mission to conduct Iseult to be the bride of his uncle, the drinking of the fateful love potion, the many adventures which his clandestine meetings with Iseult lead to, down to the final episode in which he dies—the narrative is generally so abrupt and condensed that without previous knowledge of the story it would in some places hardly be understood and in others would seem poorly motivated. It is seemingly the work of a minstrel telling a tale already familiar to his audience.

The Holy Grail

[28] J. Campion and F. Holthausen, *Sir Perceval of Gales* (Heidelberg, 1913; *Alt-und Mittelenglische Texte*, No. 5). There is an earlier edition by J. O. Halliwell (1844; *Camden Soc.*). The poem was written in the north Midlands about 1350.

[29] The literature is too extensive to be listed here. The student may consult Reginald H. Griffith, *Sir Perceval of Galles: A Study of the Sources of the Legend* (Chicago, 1911) and a series of articles by Arthur C. L. Brown called "The Grail and the English *Sir Perceval*" in *MP*, XVI-XXII (1919-24); opposed by Bruce (I. 309-312) and others.

[30] For a discussion of this part of the Vulgate cycle, see Bruce, I. 374-394.

[31] W. W. Skeat, *Joseph of Arimathie* (1871; *EETS*, 44).

[32] See p. 300.

[33] Edited by E. Kölbing, *Die nordische u. die englische Version der Tristansage* (2v, Heilbronn, 1878-82) and by George P. McNeill, *Sir Tristrem* (Edinburgh, 1886; *Scottish Text Soc.*, VIII). Bertram Vogel, "The Dialect of Sir Tristrem," *JEGP*, XL (1941). 538-544, shows that the dialect of the Auchinleck text is prevailingly that of London or the southeast Midlands and not Northern, and suggests that the author was a Londoner who had spent part of his youth in the north. It seems simplest, however, to believe that the numerous instances of *a* for Old English *ā* and occasionally other Northern features are inherited from a Northern original.

English romance contrives to treat most of the major figures and famous themes of Arthurian legend—Merlin and the early life of Arthur, Lancelot, Gawain, the morte d'Arthur, Perceval, the Grail history, Tristan and Iseult. Only the Grail quest is lacking. Nevertheless what remains seems like the chance survival of a few romances, and not always the best, from a much larger number that either died on the lips of the minstrels who chanted them or have perished in the precarious course of manuscript transmission.

v. *Non-cycle Romances*

There were many romances outside the three "matters" noted by Jean Bodel and the group which we have called the Matter of England. Among them is one of the earliest to be written in English, *Floris and Blaunche-flour,*[34] probably dating from somewhat before 1250. It is an Eastern story with analogues in the *Arabian Nights.* It concerns a king's son who refuses to give up the girl he loves, even after she has been sold to merchants and carried overseas, who finds her in Babylon among the maidens of the Sultan, and eventually is united to her. Although somewhat too brief and condensed in style, it is a charming little love story. *Ipomedon* [35] is an artfully contrived variation of the Guy of Warwick theme—the hero must establish his reputation for prowess before winning his lady's hand. In *The Squire of Low Degree* [36] a simple squire is in love with the King of Hungary's daughter. The lady in this case is favorable to him. She is also faithful to the point of keeping what she supposes is his dead body in her room for seven years. When he reappears alive and suitable explanations have been made the lovers are married with the full approval of the King. *Eger and Grime,*[37] in which the lady will wed only a knight who has never been conquered, won the commendation of even so unpartisan a critic as Lowell. A somewhat different theme appears in *Amis and Amiloun,*[38] the devoted friendship of two men, which does not stop for leprosy or the slaying of the one's children when the other's life is at stake.

Floris and Blaunche-flour

Ipomedon

The Squire of Low Degree

A group of romances, often in the twelve-line tail-rime stanza popular in the north,[39] concerns the patiently suffering wife, plotted against, exiled, deprived of her children, but eventually restored to happiness. Such is the matter of *Sir Eglamour* [40] and *Torrent of Portingale,* which closely resemble each other. In *Sir Isumbras,* the husband suffers as well. Sometimes, as in *Octavian,* a wicked mother-in-law brings about the wife's persecution, some-

Sir Eglamour

[34] Most recent edition by A. B. Taylor (Oxford, 1927). The reader will be reminded of the charming French chante-fable, *Aucassin et Nicolete,* of the thirteenth century.

[35] E. Kölbing, *Ipomedon, in drei englischen Bearbeitungen* (Breslau, 1889).

[36] Ed. W. E. Mead (Boston, 1904).

[37] Ed. J. R. Caldwell (Cambridge, Mass., 1933; *Harvard Studies in Compar. Lit.,* IX).

[38] Ed. MacEdward Leach (1937; *EETS,* 203).

[39] A score of romances in this stanza form indicate its vogue at one time. An attempt has been made by A. M. Trounce, "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances," *MA,* I (1932). 87-108, 168-182; II (1933). 34-57, 189-198; III (1934). 30-50, to show that these romances have their source in East Anglia, but the conclusion cannot be accepted.

[40] For editions of the romances mentioned in this section see Wells' *Manual* and Laura A. Hibbard, *The Mediæval Romance in England.*

times a treacherous steward, as in *Sir Triamour.* In *Le Bon Florence of Rome* treachery is manifold and knows no bounds.

William of Palerne

The supernatural enters incidentally into many romances, but in certain stories it is fundamental. *William of Palerne* tells the story of a prince of Spain who has been turned into a werewolf by his stepmother. The werewolf carries off William, the King of Apulia's son, who, when found and brought up by the Emperor, falls in love with the Emperor's daughter. After many adventures William's identity is revealed, the wicked stepmother is forced to return the werewolf to his rightful form, and the story ends in marriages all around.[41] The twelve-thousand line *Partonope of Blois*[42] is a fairy-mistress story in which Partonope's love for the mysterious Melior is twice interrupted when he disobeys her instructions and breaks the spell, but in which of course he eventually marries her. In the romance of *Partenay*[43] (or *Melusine*) the hero is not so fortunate. He marries a fairy of great beauty, promising not to disturb her on Saturdays, and is supremely happy until one Saturday he spies on her and finds that on this day she is a serpent from the waist down. He is forgiven the first time but when he repeats his offense he loses her forever. The brief alliterative romance, the *Chevelere Assigne*,[44] less than four hundred lines long, is the only treatment of the swan-knight story in English verse.

Minor Romances

A few minor romances are interesting for special reasons. The *Tale of Gamelin* is found in a number of manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, generally assigned to the Cook, and was probably among Chaucer's papers waiting to be worked up for one of the pilgrims. It is the story of the ill-treated younger brother which was to find its way into *As You Like It. Sir Degrevant* concerns a vassal wronged by his overlord, who marries the daughter and not only recovers his own but inherits his overlord's lands. It suggests the usurer plot in Elizabethan drama. *Generides,* of which we have a version in couplets and a second in rime royal, is an interesting compound of stock features—wicked steward, exiled king, faithless wife, lovers separated and estranged. In the end Clarionas comes like Iseult to cure Generides and the lovers are married.[45]

Romances of Didactic Intent

Certain romances, finally, seem to have been composed with a clearly didactic intent. *Sir Amadas* exemplifies courtesy, generosity, pledges kept at great sacrifice, and the like. *Sir Amadas* has exhausted his estate in entertainment and liberality, even giving his last forty pounds to pay off the debts of a dead knight and permit the burial of the body. When he later marries a princess and regains his former prosperity it is through the help of the soul of the grateful dead. *Sir Cleges* turns on a familiar folk motif.

[41] For an interesting discussion of the story's reflection of actual people see Irene P. McKeehan, "*Guillaume de Palerne:* A Medieval 'Best Seller'," *PMLA,* XLI (1926). 785-809.

[42] Ed. A. T. Bödtker (1912; *EETSES,* 109).

[43] Ed. W. W. Skeat (1866; *EETS,* 22).

[44] Ed. Henry H. Gibbs (1868; *EETSES,* 6).

[45] Sometimes classed with the romance is *The Seven Sages of Rome,* known in the East as the *Book of Sindibad.* It is a collection of framed tales and exists in three different Middle English versions. Ed. Killis Campbell (Boston, 1907); Karl Brunner (1933; *EETS,* 191).

The hero, forced to share any reward he receives with grasping officials, asks for twelve strokes.[46] A didactic purpose is obvious in *The King of Tars.* A Christian princess married to a heathen sultan gives birth to a formless lump of flesh. After the heathen gods have proved powerless, baptism changes the monstrosity to a handsome boy.[47] In *Titus and Vespasian*[48] (*c.* 1400) we have a thoroughly religious romance with its stories of the life of Christ, Pilate, Judas, and others woven into the miraculous cure of Vespasian from leprosy through the agency of St. Veronica's handkerchief and his own belief in Christ. The shorter and perhaps slightly earlier *Siege of Jerusalem,*[49] in alliterative verse, is similar in matter, but the poet's main interest is in the description of the battle. In stories such as these two it is difficult to say where romance ends and religious legend begins.[50]

vi. *The Breton Lay and the Fabliau*

The Breton Lay

Most medieval romances were too long to be recited at one sitting and some of them are furnished with convenient stopping points at intervals in the story. It is obvious, however, that short narratives suitable for a brief recitation, capable like the modern short story of being read or heard in complete form at one time, would be composed. Certain romances just considered, such as *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Eglamour,* are of suitable length for a single recitation and do not differ in subject matter and treatment from some of the stories discussed in the present section. They could well be included here. But it has become customary to segregate a small number of such short pieces and give them, with not too much warrant, the distinctive name of *Breton lays.*

It would seem that at one time the Bretons had a reputation for storytelling, a reputation which may owe much of its currency in the later Middle Ages to Marie de France. It is conceivable that their shorter tales were distinguished by a particular musical form, that they showed a predilection for love and the supernatural in subject matter, and that many of them had their setting in Brittany. But by the time such tales were written in English, that is, in the fourteenth century, references to the lays of the Bretons seem to be a mere convention. They are always spoken of as belonging to the rather distant past. Thus, when Chaucer's Franklin begins to tell one of them he says:

[46] See John R. Reinhard, "Strokes Shared," *Jour. Amer. Folk-Lore,* XXXVI (1923). 380-400.

[47] See Lillian H. Hornstein, "A Folklore Theme in *The King of Tars,*" *PQ,* XX (1941). 82-87; "The Historical Background of *The King of Tars,*" *Speculum,* XVI (1941). 404-414; "New Analogues to the *King of Tars,*" *MLR,* XXXVI (1941). 433-442. The valuable discussion of Robert J. Geist, "On the Genesis of *The King of Tars,*" *JEGP,* XLII (1943). 260-268, should also be consulted.

[48] Ed. J. A. Herbert (1905; *Roxburghe Club*).

[49] Ed. G. Steffler (Emden, 1891), and E. Kölbing and Mabel Day (1932; *EETS,* 188).

[50] On the relation between saint's legend and romance see Irene P. McKeehan, "Some Relationships between the Legends of British Saints and Medieval Romance," [Univ. of Chicago] *Abstracts of Theses,* Humanistic Ser., II (1926). 383-391, and the portion printed in full as "St. Edmund of East Anglia: The Development of a Romantic Legend," *Univ. of Colorado Studies,* XV (1925). 13-74.

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse adventures maden layes,
Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge;
Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe,
Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce....

This is similar to the opening lines of *Sir Orfeo,* a passage which is also found at the beginning of the *Lay le Freine,* where we are told:

In Brytayn þis layes arne y-wryte,
Furst y-founde and forþe y-gete....

When þey myght owher [anywhere] heryn
Of adventurës þat þer weryn,
Þey toke her harpys wiþ game,
Maden layes and ȝaf it name.

The same passage tells us that Breton lays may treat of almost any subject—weal or woe, joy and mirth, treachery and guile, even jests and ribaldry; some, it says, are of faëry, but most are about love. Certainly there is nothing distinctive in the subject or treatment of the so-called Breton lays in English, and whether a given short romance is classed as a Breton lay or not depends mainly on whether it says it is one (e.g., *The Earl of Toulouse, Sir Orfeo, Lay le Freine*), or has its scene laid in Brittany (*Sir Degarë*), or contains a passing reference to Brittany (*Sir Launfal*), or tells a story found among the *lais* of Marie de France. Doubtless reference to the Bretons was often no more than a trick of the poet to lend authority or the charm of age to his story.

Emare

We can but glance in passing at the delightful little English poems which constitute the group. *Emare* [51] is a supreme instance of a story made up of the commonplaces of romance. There is not a novel character or situation in it. To list its episodes is to begin a motif-index of medieval romance—the emperor who wishes to marry his own daughter, the heroine set adrift in a boat, in this case twice, the wicked mother-in-law who not only opposes her son's marriage but by a substitution of letters brings about the unhappy bride's exile, pilgrimages to Rome with their chain of coincidences bringing about final recognition and reunion. It must not be supposed, however, that the story is without charm. Emare herself is very beautiful, and bears her sufferings with so much sweetness and patience that she wins our hearts. The king, her husband, loves her so loyally and behaves so honorably that we rejoice with him when his wife and child are at long last restored. *Emare* is classed as a Breton lay because the poet says it is one. Chaucer's Constance story told by the Man of Law, which is very similar, is not. *Sir Degarë* [52] is also made up of familiar features—the king who will marry his daughter

Sir Degare

[51] Ed. A. B. Gough (Heidelberg, 1901), Edith Rickert (1908; *EETSES,* 99), and in French and Hale's *Middle English Metrical Romances.*

[52] Ed. David Laing (1849; *Abbotsford Club*), and in French and Hale, *op. cit.* A later text is in Hales and Furnivall's edition of the Percy Folio, Vol. III. See also George P. Faust, *Sir Degare: A Study of the Texts and Narrative Structure* (1935; *Princeton Studies in English,* 11)

only to one who overcomes him in battle, the daughter forced to yield to an unknown knight in the forest, the child left on a hermit's step, the youth who nearly marries his own mother but recognizes her through a pair of gloves that will fit no one else, the son who discovers his father through a sword with a missing piece. The scene is Little Britain, but this is the only thing that makes it a Breton lay.

Le Freine

Two of the English lays derive ultimately from *lais* of Marie de France. The *Lay le Freine,*[53] so named, as the English poet tells us, because *freine* in French means ash-tree, tells the story of an infant abandoned in a hollow ash, who later wins a husband and her parents back through one turn of Fortune's wheel. *Sir Landeval*[54] is about a knight who enjoys the love of a fairy mistress as long as he refrains from any mention of her, who breaks the covenant and loses her, but, since there are extenuating circumstances, recovers her favor. *Sir Landeval* was elaborated by Thomas of Chester in his *Sir Launfal,*[55] without always being improved in the process. *Sir Orfeo*[56] retells the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice with medieval modifications. *Sir Gowther,*[57] telling the legend of Robert the Devil, is not without its didactic intent; indeed one manuscript ends with the words, "Explicit Vita Sancti." *The Earl of Toulouse*[58] is the story of a vassal persecuted by the Emperor; in the end he not only wins justice but marries the Emperor's beautiful widow. It resembles in a number of ways the story of *Sir Degrevant* (see above), but because the author of *The Earl of Toulouse* says he got it from "a lay of Bretayn" the latter is included among Breton lays.

Sir Landeval

Other Lays

Miracles of the Virgin

The edifying element found in some of the lays becomes the chief feature of another type of short narrative, the miracle of the Virgin. The miracle of the Virgin is a kind of *conte dévot* or pious tale in which devotion to the Virgin wins her intercession. Thus, the nun who has run away from her convent and has returned repentant after a period of worldly life finds her absence unnoticed. Because she had venerated the Virgin from the days when she was a young novice, her place has been supplied and her duties have been performed by the Mother of Christ. Readers are familiar with the story in John Davidson's *Ballad of a Nun* and in the dramatic production *The Miracle,* in which Lady Diana Manners appeared in the rôle of the Virgin. In another widely distributed example a harlot is induced to pray. She prays in a chapel dedicated to the Virgin and at her death is assured of salvation. The tale told by Chaucer's Prioress is another well-known example of the type. A small collection of these stories is found in the *South English Legendary.* A more important group of forty-two apparently once formed part of the famous Vernon manuscript, but in the present mutilated condition of the codex only nine are preserved. Finally, not to mention

[53] Ed. H. Weber, *Metrical Romances,* Vol. I, and H. Varnhagen, *Anglia,* III (1880), 415-423.
[54] Ed. G. L. Kittredge, *Amer. Jour. Phil.,* X (1889). 1-33, and Rudolf Zimmermann (Köningsberg, 1900).
[55] Most conveniently available in French and Hale, *op. cit.*
[56] In French and Hale, *op. cit.*
[57] Ed. Karl Breul (Oppeln, 1886).
[58] In French and Hale, *op. cit.*

scattered examples, there is a collection of eighteen in a Phillipps manuscript now in the British Museum. These collections, which are all in verse, extend from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, but the type is dateless and examples in English may well have existed as early as the twelfth century.[59]

The Fabliau

One other form of narrative poem in Middle English must be mentioned here, and its aim was simply to entertain. The fabliau, like the lay and the miracle of the Virgin, is short, but there the resemblance stops. It is a humorous story, generally ribald or at least unconventional, told in verse with conscious literary art. In the Middle Ages it enjoyed its greatest vogue in France,[60] but turned into prose it forms an important element in such collections of tales as we have in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and their derivatives in all the languages of Europe. It is in no sense biographical and seeks its effect in the rapid succession of events forming a single episode. Its humor is not that of the jest, nor does it depend on a play on words, but is the humor of situation, rooted in human nature. It has a special fondness for wives who trick their husbands, and individuals whose greed or gullibility makes them fair game for the cleverness of rogues.

Examples in Chaucer

In English the type is best represented by a half dozen stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* those told by the Miller, the Reeve, the Friar, the Summoner, the Merchant, and the Shipman. The Cook's tale would undoubtedly have been of the type if he had gone on. That Chaucer was aware of the effect which such of his tales would have upon some readers is evident in his warning just before beginning the *Miller's Tale:*

> And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and ches another tale.

Dame Sirith

Before Chaucer the only true fabliau in English is *Dame Sirith* [61] (*c.* 1250), turning on a trick by which Dame Sirith, a hypocritical bawd, succeeds in terrifying a young wife named Margeri into accepting as a lover the clerk Wilekin. The plot outrages probability, but the tale is skilfully told with much natural dialogue. There are a few post-Chaucerian pieces such as *The*

[59] The basic work on the miracles of the Virgin is A. Mussafia, *Studien zu den mittelalterlichen Marienlegenden* (5 parts, Vienna, 1887-98; *Sitzungsberichte der kgl. Akad. der Wissenchaften,* Philos.-hist. Classe, CXIII-CXXXIX). Much important material on collections in Latin, French, and English will be found in H. L. D. Ward, *Catalogue of Romances . . . in the British Museum,* II (1893). 586-740. A list of Latin miracles running to nearly 1800 items has been published by Father Poncelet in *Analecta Bollandiana,* XXI (1902). 241-360. One of the best known collections in the Middle Ages was that of Johannes Herolt, which can be read in the translation of C. C. S. Bland (1928), with an excellent short Introduction by Eileen Power. G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion,* I (Cambridge, 1923). 501-516, offers a brief discussion with examples. Ruth W. Tryon, "Miracles of Our Lady in Middle English Verse," *PMLA,* XXXVIII (1923). 308-388, publishes a number of hitherto unprinted texts.

[60] The standard work on the subject is J. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux* (4ed., Paris, 1925). For the fabliau in English see the introduction to George H. McKnight, *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse* (Boston, 1913), H. S. Canby, "The English Fabliau," *PMLA,* XXI (1906). 200-214, and W. M. Hart, "The Fabliau and Popular Literature," *PMLA,* XXIII (1908). 329-374.

[61] In McKnight, as above, and for discussion see Edward Schröder, *"Dame Sirith," Nachrichten aus der neueren Philologie und Literaturgeschichte,* I (1937). 179-202 (*Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*).

Wright's Chaste Wife[62] and *The Prioress and Her Three Suitors,*[63] but they do not merit treatment here. When we consider that nearly one hundred and fifty specimens of the fabliau are found in Old French, we can only believe that these realistic episodes from everyday life ran counter to the more puritan spirit in England and were less often committed to writing than allowed to die on the lips of minstrels and other purveyors of backstairs entertainment.[64]

[62] Edited by Furnivall, *EETS,* 12.

[63] Ed. Johannes Prinz, *A Tale of a Prioress and Her Three Wooers* (Berlin, 1911; *Literarhistorische Forschungen,* 47), and J. O. Halliwell, *Minor Poems of . . . Lydgate* (1840; *Percy Soc.,* II), pp. 107-117.

[64] A number of stories found in the French fabliaux occur in the English ballads.