THE VIRGIN MARY AND ROMANCE

From its very start, the Middle English poem *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300) is a work written to deny the best tunes to the Devil. Its unknown author begins it with a catalogue of heroes from romance, including Alexander, Brut, King Arthur, Gawain, Kay, Tristan, Yonec and Ysumbras; but then goes on to reject these fabled knights for the higher argument of religious poetry, and sets about this by praising the Blessed Virgin as a romance heroine. He calls her his "paramour" who saves him from sin, who has been faithful to him even when he has not been faithful to her, and whose love is sweeter than wild honey.

> Qua truly loues this lemman,
> This es the lue bes neuer gan;
> For in this loue scho failes neuer,
> And in that tother scho lastes euer.
> Of suilk an suld ye mater take,
> Crafty that can rimes make,
> Of hir to malk bath rim and sang
> And luue hir suette sun amang![1]

The present article has the aim of bringing together recent discussion of those *rimes* and *sanges* whose authors, as it were, took the *Cursor*

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[1].- *Early Middle English Verse and Prose,* ed. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers (Oxford, 1968), 188.

poet, used romance modes to coax their listeners form secular verse onto the more wholesome fare of religious instruction. Others used romance modes because these had come to permeate their religious imagination; it was natural for them, like the author of *Ancrene Wisse* with his fable of Christ the lover-knight, to express religious truths in the language of romance. Some poems of great beauty result from this. Other poets used romance idiom because they were low-grade hacks, unwilling or unable to discard the way they told secular tales when they composed religious verse, which, characterized by the tone of the literary huckster, is of scant merit.

Each of these three kinds of verse should be distinguished from the religious poetry which is more closely related to secular lyric rather than romance, whether as sacred parody, or by appropriating the language and motifs (epistolary form, eulogy, inexpressibility topoi) of love lyric.[1]

One of the most subtle of the religious lyrics influenced by romance is a verse (late 14C) from Oxford, Magdalen College, MS 60.

At a sprynge-wel under a thorn
Ther was bote of bale
A lytel here aforn;
Ther bysyde stant a mayde,
Fulle of love ybounde.
Hoso wol seche trwe love,

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[1].- On parody and the use of secular motifs in religious verse see *Medieval English Lyrics,* ed. Theodore Silverstein (London, 1971), 110, and Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London, 1972), 58. One such topos (the world as paper) in English secular and religious verse is discussed in the present writer's 'Bepai'r ddaear yn bapir', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic studies,* xxx (1982-83), 274-77.

Yn hyr hyt schal be founde.[1]

Few Middle English poems are more pregnant in allusion than this one. It occurs in a Latin exemplum on penance, which tells how an impoverished nobleman was hindered by shame and his enemies from coming to court to receive grace. In the exemplum, the spring by the thorn is explained as Christ's wound that flowed blood and water, and the maiden as the Blessed Virgin, help of sinners; one may note, too, the ideas (found in other lyrics) of the wound in Christ's side as a healing and cleansing well, and the maiden beside the thornbush as the Virgin at Christ's Cross, counter to Eve at the tree of death. In addition, Peter Dronke has noted how in certain apocryphal Christian writings the Annunciation takes place at a fountain beside a thornbush; the fountain appears as early as the second-century *Protoevangelium* of St James and the *Gospel of pseudo-Matthew* based upon it. This linking of the Blessed Virgin with a spring by a thorn also appears in another English lyric (early 15C) on the Epiphany.[2]

But the poem contains in addition parallels from secular narrative. Professor Gray has referred to romances in which springs and thorn-trees are things of magic: Yvain encounters the gateway to the Other World at a swirling spring shadowed by a beautiful tree; Viviane enchants Merlin in the forest of Broceliande under a flowering thorn; Sir Cawline meets the fairy king at the thorn of Eldridge Hill; and

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1.- *A selection of Religious Lyrics,* ed. Douglas Gray (Oxford, 1975), 57. Cf. *Medieval English Lyrics,* ed. R. T. Davies (London, 1963), 212, and Silverstein, 72. The poem is 420 in Carleton Brown and R. H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York, 1943) and its *Supplement* by R. H. Robbins and J. L. Cutler (Lexington, Kentucky, 1966).

2.- Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (London, 1968), 69-70; Gray, *Themes,* 92-93e. Cf. *The Apocryphal New Testament,* tr. M. R. James (Oxford, 1924), 42, 74. The Epiphany lyric mentioned (*Index* 27330, 3527) is edited in Silverstein, 100-02 and (both versions) *The Early English Carols,* ed. R. L. Greene (Oxford, 1977), 68-69.

Graelent encounters his mistress, an otherworld *fée*, by a spring of clear sweet water. This may (or may not) be a sign of Celtic influence, since Celtic tradition commonly linked springs and fairy mistresses. In one Irish saga (9C) the fairy Édaín, for example, is found at the edge of a spring, 'washing her hair in a silver bowl with four golden birds on it, and little flashing jewels of purple carbuncle on the rims of the bowl.'[1]

The poem also reflects the poetry of profane love in the phrase *bote of bale,* 'remedy of sorrow', and the image of being bound by love. This second Professor Gray has related to the *Carmina Burana,* the Middle English *Destruction of Troy* (c. 1400), and even the image on a Limoges casket, where the girl holds her lover with a chain round his neck. Other references to love's 'bridle' or 'noose' *(A womman thee hath in her laas!)* occur in *Kyng Alisaunder* (c. 1290), *Amis and Amiloune*, and Chaucer, a point underlined by the other religious examples of them in John of Grimestone's preaching book (1372). The image plainly came into vogue in late 14C England; and John of Grimestone's book shows that the author of 'At a well-sprynge' was not the only religious writer to exploit it.[2]

Sophistication of a different kind appears in a balade of 15 stanzas rhyme royal, complete with acrostic, from a Bodleian manuscript containing various ME poems, including *Sir Degaré.* The courtly ambience of this poem, 'Away, feynt lufe, full of varyaunce!', an elaborate love-lyric to the Virgin, is more than usually obvious. Since the poem addresses the Virgin as heavenly mistress, there is a certain

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1.- Kenneth Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 1811-82, and cf. M. W. Annear, 'Some Healing and Holy Wells of Wales' in *Wales and Medicine*, ed John Cule ([London,] 1975), 185-89.

2.- Gray, *Themes,* 92-94; Bennett and Smithers, 34, 37, 281, 282.

logic in its introduction of a classic boy-meets-girl scenario of Middle English romance:

> Par case sche be off hygh degre,
> And I off lowe and pouer estate,
> Yyit if fortune my frend wyll be,
> I may her wyn, other erly or late.
> I have knowyn sum so fortunate,
> Wych though they were ful lowe of kyn,
> Kyngys doghtyrs by grace dyd wyn.

The opening lines of the romance *The Squire of Low Degre* (c. 1450) put such situations in nutshell.

> It was a squer of lowe degre
> That loved the kings doughter of Hungre...[1]

Another love poem to the Virgin, 'Edi beo thu heuene quene' (mid-13C), may be mentioned here as containing features perhaps as much due to romance as secular love lyric: the way the speaker renders homage to the BVM in feudal terms as her 'man' ('have mercy of thine knight', 'ic am thy mon'); and in the mention, once again, of the 'bond' of a love ('Ic em in thine lovebende') here called 'derne'. In *Floris and Blauncheflour* (? c. 1250) Clarice attends the lovers in bed 'dernelich and stille'; while the downwardly mobile romance links of the cliché 'derne love' are suggested by that anti-romance *The Miller's Tale,* where it describes Nicholas's brisk mode of dalliance.[2]

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[1].- Grau. Selection, 59, 133; cf. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages,* 2279-80; Index 456.

[2].- Davies, 64-67, 313; Silverstein, 24-26; *The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse,* ed. Kenneth and Celia Sisam (Oxford, 1970), 42-44; *Index* 708. The poem is also edited

Themes and language which certainly belong to the relation of lover and mistress in romance appear in the lyric 'Haile be thu, mari maiden bright!' (earlier 14C), on the BVM's five Joys, from the Göttingen manuscript of *Cursor Mundi.* Of the Annuciation the poet says,

> Ther thouy lay in thy bright bowr,
> Levedy, quite as lily-flowr,
> An angel com fra hevene-towr,
> Sant Gabriel,
> And said: 'Levedy ful of blis, ay worth thee wel!'[1]

This stanza has been discussed by Professor Gray, who has pointed out the influence of romance on it. 'Lily-white' and 'bright in bour' are clichés for the heroines of popular romance and lyric, duly pilloried in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, where the knight, beloved of 'many a mayde, bright in bour', has lily-white armour and a lily on his helmet.[2] But by talking of Gabriel, like a knight from his 'towr', entering the 'bour'where the Virgin 'lay', the poet goes further, by introducing romance associations somehow slightly shocking, with a *frisson* of the erotic. Professor Gray compares the Latin sequence (13C ?English), *Angelus ad Virginem:*

> Angelus ad Virginem
> Subintrans in conclave,

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in *Medieval English Songs,* ed. E. J. Dobson and F. L. Harrison (London, 1979). Woolf, 127-128 and Gray, *Themes,* 56-57, provide comment on its motifs, while E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's tale', in his *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), 19-20, comments on *derne love.*

1.- Sisam, 190; *Index* 1029.

2.- Bennett and Smithers, 321-22; *The Canterbury Tales,* VII 742m 866-67, 907.

Virgineis formidimem
Demulcens inquit 'Ave',

i.e., 'the angel, secretly entering her chamber, softly overcoming the virgin's fear, says to her "Hail".' How to take these verses is not entirely easy. One can refer to medieval traditions in which Christ is portrayed as the lover-knight, with the BVM as his beloved, as when Guillaume De Guilleville describes the Son of God seeing the Virgin from heaven and being charmed by her beauty. But one also see suggestions in both poems of a collapse of taste. The musical preferences of Chaucer's *hende* Nicholas (Who sang 'Angelus ad Virginem') do not inspire confidence.[1]

Such fears are absent from another lyric discussed by Professor Gray, 'I sing of a maiden' (earlier 15C).

I syng of a mayden that is makeles,
Kyng of alle kynges to here sone che ches.

He cam also stylle ther his moder was
As dew in Aprylle that fallyt on the gras.

He cam also stylle to his moderes bowr
As dew in Aprille that fallyt on the flour.

He cam also stylle ther his moder lay
As dew in Aprille that fallyt on the spray.

Moder and maydyn was never non but che--
Wel may swych a lady Godes moder be![2]

1.- Yrjö Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine* (London, 1958), 208, 373; *Themes,* 104. Cf. *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse,* ed. Frederick Brittain (Harmondsworth, 1962), 275-77.

2.- Gray, *Selection,* 4-5; cf. Davies, 155, Silverstein, 99, and Sisam, 432-33; *Index* 1367.

Once again we have words and concepts familiar from romance: this maiden is 'makeles', just as Criseyde herself was, 'In beaute first so stood she, makeless'; and, like a secular heroine, the 'lady' (significant word) of this lyric 'chose' the royal one who came to her 'bower'. But in this poem any hint of the worldly has vanished, in contrast to the English poem previous. One can only praise the art of its author in the way he transmuted his material.[1]

For a contrast one may turn to a lament of the Virgin Mary (15C) which begins,

> Listyns, lordyngus, to my tale
> And ye shall here of on story,
> Is bettur then outher wyne or ale
> That euer was made in this cuntry,
> How iewys demyd my son to dye.
> yohan a deth to hym thei drest.
> 'Alas!' seyd Mary that is so fre,
> 'That chylde is ded that soke my brest.'

The poem has been curtly judged, especially this stanza. It starts like any popular minstrel romance (compare first lines 1876 to 1910 and 1984 to 1996 in *The Index of Middle English Verse),* its mention of 'wyne or ale' at the same uncourtly level as Sir Thopas's oath 'on ale and breed'. It then introduces the Blessed Virgin in the first person, and then switches this to third person; confusion apart, it is in any case

[1].- *Troilus and Criseyde,* i. 172; Gray, *Themes,* 1011-06. In the 13C poem which supposedly gives the hint for the above 15C poem roles are reversed. It is Christ who chooses the Virgin (Woolf, 1433).

highly incongruous that the Blessed Virgin should address a company of seated and convivial nobility, as Rosemary Woolf pointed out; though a modern film director might dissent. However, it is more likely that the author of this poem is an incompetent hack rather than some fifteenth-century proponent of radical artistic progress. Another Marian production of similar style and audience may be mentioned here, *Miracles of Our Lady,* if only for Derek Pearsall's comment on its 'appeal to the most degraded taste for pious titillation.'[1]

A different romance symptom appears in the hymn to the Virgin, 'Marye, maide milde and free' (c. 1325), perhaps by William of Shoreham, which addresses the Virgin thus:

> Thou art the bushe of sinay,
> Thou art the righte Sarray,
> Thou hast y-brought us out of cry,
> Of calenge, of the fende.
> Thou art Cristes owne drury,
> And of Davyes kende.

Few words are more part of popular romance idiom than 'drury', as is shown (backhandedly) by the fact that, except in his early translation *The Romaunt of the Rose,* Chaucer uses it precisely once, in (need one say?) *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the second fit of which

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[1].- Woolf, 259-60; *Index* 1899. On the *Miracles* cf. Gray, *Themes,* 255, Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London, 1977), 140, and *Index* 1984, etc. For a similar familiar attitude to the BVM, cf. my 'The Girdle of Prato and its Rivals', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies,* xxxiii (1986), 96.

promises a *spelle* 'of bataille and of chivalry, / And of ladyes *love-drury.'* In *Floris and Blauncheflour,* Clarice speaks to Blauncheflour words full of *fin amour,* 'That hele Ich wille youre bother *druri*', whereupon she brings the happy lovers to the bedroom.

More edifying is *Ancrene Wisse*, which says of Christ's words, *Pacem relinquo uobis: pacem meam do uobis,* 'this wes his *druerie* thet he leafde ant yef ham in his departunge.' The range of usage here demonstrates the extraordinary way 'drury' came to penetrate spirituality at the highest levels, especially remarkable since the root, related to Celtic words for 'valour' and 'madness' appears first (in St Aldhelm) with the medieval Latin *indruticare*, 'flaunt, behave wantonly'. Chaucer's use of it -or failure to use it- shows how drably *demodé* it had become in his time.[1]

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[1].- Sisam, 164-65; cf. Davies, 103, *Index* 2107. On the word *drury* see Bennett and Smithers, 51, 229, 280 and Gray, *Themes,* 104.