

[Essays in Medieval Studies 11](#)

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page 119**9. Fearful Villainy****Douglas Moffat**

When Shame discovers Danger, the *vilein*, asleep in the Garden of Delight, the rose that he should have been guarding having been kissed by Amant, she scolds him in the following way:

Vos saiez fel e estouz,
 Plains de rampones e d'outrages:
 Vilains qui est cortois e sages;
 I'ai oï dire en reprouier,
 Que l'en ne puet fere espreuier
 En nulle guise de busart.

(You should be savage and rude and harsh and insolent. A courteous churl is an anomaly, And as I have often heard quoted in reproof: "No man of a buzzard can make a hawk.")¹

In this small scene from Guillaume de Lorris's portion of *The Romance of the Rose*, Shame upbraids Danger for being atypical, for not acting the stereotype. Her perception of the truthfulness of this stereotype is widely shared, and not only by literary characters. The dominant culture of the Middle Ages, the culture of the feudal aristocracy, not only expected but also required that *vileins*, churls, always fulfil their stereotypical role. In fact, the stereotypical *vilein*, as the repository and exponent of what can be called, with deliberate ambiguity, "villainous" behavior, defined negatively the courtly and chivalric ideals of the aristocracy. To put it another way, the stereotypical figure of the *vilein* was a crucial component of feudal aristocratic ideology, using the fifth of the six definitions offered by Terry Eagleton in his introduction to the concept: a group of "ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion or dissimulation."² Furthermore, this need to

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exclude the *vilein* from all that distinguishes the aristocrat as "naturally" good, thereby legitimating his position in society, actually masks aristocratic anxieties about those below them, fears that are discernible in the literary products of the age.

It is true that medieval writers never seem to tire of those old saws, that even a man of high station can act like a *vilein*, that gentility might be found even in a cow shed. But these exceptions only confirm the rule: the *vilein* as stereotype behaves in exactly the opposite way from a courtly and chivalrous man; the *vilein* lacks courtesy, good manners, discretion, largesse, magnanimity, and so forth. Even in his physical appearance the *vilein*, because of his gross and filthy ugliness, embodies the opposite of the courtly ideal. *The Romance of the Rose*, because of the formalism of its allegory, makes explicit a fundamental stylistic opposition between *vilein* and courtier. Amant achieves entry into the Garden of Delight, is invited to join the dance of Mirth's beautiful companions, and finally becomes the God of Love's man because of his courteous manners. Villainy is one of the figures depicted on the outside of the garden wall, one of those excluded from the company of Mirth, and it might be argued that all the figures depicted there represent "villainous" behavior or situations. It is the stricken Amant's courteous behavior and words, not any moral qualities, that win over the God of Love to him:

Ie t'ains mout e pris
 Dont tu as respondi ainsi,
 Onques tel response n'issi
 De vilain home mal ensegnié.

(Much do I love you, and I praise the speech
 That you have made; never could such a response
 Come from a villainous, untutored man.)³

And Love's first commandment to Amant is, in effect, "Thou shalt not be villainous."⁴ To be sure, says Love, not averse to an old saw himself, villainy is not only to be found in the low-born, illustrating the point with the example of Sir Kay versus Sir Gawain,⁵ but villainy is defined by the behavior and attitudes of the low-born: it is an effect of style rather than ethics. Finally, near the end of Guillaume's portion of the *Romance*, Amant's path to the Rose is brutally blocked by Danger, who churlishly threatens physical violence. Fair Welcome, the son of Courtesy, counsils Amant to trick Danger into disregarding his duties, which results in Amant's kiss of the rose, and finally in the passage with which the paper began.⁶

Arguments have been advanced that courtliness is in origin and in essence ethically inspired, and that it functioned as a profound civilizing force in the Middle Ages and beyond. The position is well articulated by Stephen Jaeger, who writes that "courtesy is in origin an instrument of the urges to civilizing, of the forces in which that process originates, and not an outgrowth of the

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process itself."⁷ Johan Huizinga's contention that chivalry and courtliness became more a question of style than ethics in the later Middle Ages has been challenged, perhaps most forcefully by Maurice Keen, who argues that later secular knightly orders were genuinely devoted to the values of "loyalty and courage."⁸ The opposition of aristocrat to *vilein* viewed from this angle might be dismissed as a by-product of courtly culture and of dubious relevance to any analysis of that culture. Looking at this opposition from a completely different perspective, however, Toril Moi argues that it is not a mere by-product of the courtly culture but a basic motivation for its development. She claims that "the function of chivalry and courtliness seems to have been to provide the ruling feudal aristocracy with a legitimizing ideology," and further, that "the codes of courtly and chivalric behavior seem selected precisely by virtue of their inaccessibility to the lower classes."⁹ She illustrates the last point with a list of exclusionary requirements concerning dress, refinement, cleanliness, and so on.

Moi's perspective forces us to consider any expression of courtly values in a context of material practices designed to maintain a concentration of social, economic, and political power in the feudal class. This ever-present material context moves out from the shadows whenever the figure of the *vilein* appears, even in courtly discourse. But the idea that courtly values serve only to mask the true bases of feudal power, and further, were fabricated only in order to effect this disguise, oversimplifies the ideological situation. The emphasis of scholars like Jaeger and Keen on "men and ideas," to use Jaeger's phrase, forces us to consider alongside Moi's insights that any expression of courtly values also resonates with the genuine ideals and aspirations of certain individual people, no matter how distorted these may have become. The human origin of ideology is too often marginalized and even occluded by the institutional focus of those who most often write about ideology, by what is, in fact, their own ideology.

Perhaps all ideology begins at the frontier of idealism and necessity, distorting the former in order to accommodate the latter. Confronted with the *vilein*, or the subject of Moi's analysis, the woman, the genuine idealistic desires and values of courtly culture reach a limit or boundary beyond which they cannot pass. But what lies beyond that boundary in both cases, although unembraceable within these ideals, must of social and economic necessity be accounted for and controlled. Simply put, both women and *vileins* are needed. Moi demonstrates that courtly love should be understood as an ideological construct because it works to dehumanize women, by means of idealization, in order to establish male control over them. By the same token, the dehumanization of the *vilein* by means of a distorting stereotype, an inverse idealization, can also be interpreted as an axiom of courtly ideology. Moi with her Lacanian perspective argues that this need to dehumanize the woman exposes unconscious, unsatisfiable yearnings in the male-based courtly culture and, thereby, its fundamental hollowness and illegitimacy.¹⁰ In the case of the distorted courtly perception of the *vilein* we witness the treatment of those who cannot be included within the ambit of the courtly yet who cannot be ignored because of their vital economic role. At the very least this distortion allows us to observe what

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happens at the limits of courtliness where idealism must be transformed into ideology. However, the argument of this paper is that the distortion of the *vilein* points beyond aristocratic recognition of the need to control those below him to an unsettling intimation of the limits of their legitimacy, authority, and power. As the Middle Ages wears on and the secular non-aristocratic portion of society differentiates and begins to obtrude with increasingly disturbing frequency, and in a variety of ways, into the lives and power of the aristocracy, these intimations might be better characterized as

anxieties.

This paper will examine the treatments of three particular *vileins* in two late fourteenth-century Middle English romances, *Octovian* and *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and offer each treatment as evidence of a specific aristocratic anxiety. A basic assumption for my argument is that medieval romance is so closely identified with aristocratic ideals and the courtly style that, if we choose to look, we can discover not only explicit expression of those ideals but also underlying assumptions, thoughts, and feelings. Stephen Knight argues that we can find in medieval romance idealized justifications for aristocratic attitudes and behavior and use of power.¹¹ Nevertheless, one must still bear in mind that even in a literary genre as saturated in aristocratic ideology as medieval romance, generic constraints as well as economic and political conditions are such that unadulterated ideological statement is impossible. In fact, one might say that the figure of the *vilein* in medieval romance is a site at which the disjunction between ideology, history, and genre becomes highly visible.

The main *vilein* character in *Octovian* is not in any legal sense a *vilein*. Rather, he is a Parisian bourgeois who, while on pilgrimage in the east, buys a child from two desperados. The child happens to be Florent, one of the two lost twins of the emperor of Rome. So a situation is established in which the innate gentility of Florent bumps continually into the bourgeois attitudes and expectations of his apparent "father," and the ensuing confrontations are really quite funny. On one occasion father decides that son should learn a trade, so he sends him off with a brace of oxen to be trained by a butcher. On the way Florent sees a *gentil fawcon* being offered for sale by a squire and, forgetting his purpose, decides that a straight exchange, oxen for falcon, would be a good deal. The outraged father rewards his bewildered son with a beating, but alas, to no effect. Florent protests:

'Syr,' he seyde, 'for Crystys ore,
Leue, and bete me no more,
But ye wiste well why.
Wolde ye stonde now and beholde
How feyre he can hys fedurs folde,
And how louely they lye,
Ye wolde pray God wyth all your mode
That ye had solde halfe your gode,
Soche anodur to bye.' (688-96)¹²

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Clement's wife, Gladwyn, pities Florent and begs her husband to let their other sons learn a trade instead, adding that

Soche grace may God for e chylde haue wrozt,
To a bettur man he may be broght
Than he a bocher were. (706-708)

On another occasion father sends son off on an errand, to bring forty pounds to his step-brother. This time the boy spies a *feyre stede* and inquires if it is for sale and for how much. The owner says he will sell the horse for thirty pounds, but Florent, enamored of the beast, protests that the price is too low. He insists that the owner take all the forty pounds, or rather his father's forty pounds, and proceeds to bring the horse home and stable it in the hall. Of course what is being portrayed here is what we would call these days Florent's genetic predisposition toward aristocratic values and attitudes, which his stepmother finally perceives after the horse episode, as father prepares to beat son one more time. She pleads with her husband:

Owre feyre chylde bete ye noght!
Ye may see, and ye vndurstode,
That he had neuyr kynde of y blode,
That he ese werkys hath wroght. (753-56)

Out of the mouth of this bourgeois woman comes the "truth": Florent cannot be expected to act as Clement does, because he is, almost, of a different species. *Kynde* taken in the sense of the MED's *kinde* n.(1) 5a(a) "the natural

instincts, desires, or feelings within a man or animal" is here collocated with *blode*, probably either the MED's *blod* n.(1) 6a(a) "lineage, descent, ancestry; stock, race" or 6a(d) "person of a (specific) lineage." The effect is to conjoin the two, that is, to render "natural instincts, etc." a function of "lineage, etc." People must act according to their *blod*, their nature, regardless of their nurture. *Kinde*, like murder, will out.

In fact the gap between Florent and Clement in regard to *blod* is a chasm. Florent, of course, is an emperor's son; Clement is a bourgeois, but his name is Clement þe Velayne, and this is not a trivial point. This is also his name in the French source, although this fact is not provided there as immediately as it is in the English.¹³ According to Frances McSparren, the most recent editor of the poem, Clement is a figure of fun in the French as well, but he is also portrayed as a "prosperous and substantial figure, who represents the pragmatic, bourgeois point of view, and much more is made of his rejection of the assumptions and values of knighthood than in the English."¹⁴ In the French, then, Clement gives voice to what Raymond Williams calls an emergent culture.¹⁵ Despite the insistence by some, including McSparren and Derek Pearsall, that the English *Octovian* is intended for a bourgeois audience, I think the poem reveals, relative

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to the French, a polarization of aristocratic and bourgeois values, to the detriment of the latter.¹⁶ The figure of Clement in the English *Octovian* stands for no point of view that might have been appealing to bourgeois readers. Rather, he functions as an utterly ineffectual check to his son's true nature in their private life together, and once Florent begins to reveal this true nature to the public, Clement is transformed into a ridiculous zany, a kind of medieval Slim Pickens who can be counted on for buffoonery.¹⁷

Florent's coming out, as it were, occurs when he insists on fighting the Saracen giant who is menacing Paris. He dons his father's rusty war gear, and Clement tries to hand him the sword, beginning his career as his sidekick:

Clement drewe þe swerd bot owte it nolde,
 Gladwyn his wyfe sold þe schaweberecke holde,
 And bothe righte faste þay drewe;
 And when þe swerd owte glente
 Bothe vnto the erthe þ ay went:
 þan was ther gamen ynoghe.
 Clement felle to þe bynke so faste
 þat mouthe and nese al tobraste,
 And Florente stode and loghe.
 Grete gamen it es to telle
 How þay bothe to the erthe felle,
 And Clement laye in swoghe. (804-15)¹⁸

Florent defeats the giant, and all but carries off the Sultan's daughter Marsabel, "so priketh him nature in his corage." He becomes the toast of Paris, is knighted by King Dagobert and finally is reunited with his father, the emperor of Rome, who has come to the city's defence. While all these momentous events are going on, Clement is engaged in actions like holding the cloaks of the nobles as a surety so that he won't get stuck with the bill for Florent's elevation to knighthood (1065-76).

When Florent tells his true father, the emperor, whom he has never met, that he feels more affection for him as a father than he does for Clement, the only pathos we are to feel is that generated by the reconciliation:

Than spekes þe emperoure anone ryghte
 To Florent . . .
 ' onge knyghte, telle þou me,
 If zone man thyn owen fadir be.'
 The childe answerede hym till:
 'Sir, lufe hade I neuir hym too
 Als I solde to my fadir doo,

Neuir in herte ne wille.
 Bot of all the men þat euir sawe I,
 Moste lufes myn herte zowe sekirly. (1113-23)

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Once Florent's identity is established the emperor is, needless to say, overjoyed, and Clement is paid off, much to his satisfaction, one imagines, with *welthys fele* (1158).

Clement is portrayed as unrelentingly ignoble. He does not belong in aristocratic society. With his concern for money and his ignorance of courtly style, he serves as a caricature of the emergent mercantile/artisan class. Therefore he can be regarded as wholly separate from the aristocrats, including his foster son, who take such pleasure in his antics. Calling him the Vilein reveals a typical dominant strategy of conflating all below one's own station into a single underclass denominated by the lowest rank therein. However, behind the confident division of those who fight from those who work, and the demeaning of the whole latter group as *vileins*, lurks the fear of this mercantile/artisan class who dominate urban life. The ability of this group to generate cash must have inspired loathing and envy in the feudal aristocracy. Those who work can, in the right circumstances, turn a profit from their labor. They can make money. If they cannot be constrained to turn this surplus over to their betters, with this money they can purchase the trappings of power, and perhaps, eventually, power itself. Through the figure of Clement the Vilein the writer of *Octovian* would mount an ideological defence against this threat. He ridicules the "natural" insufficiencies of the emergent middle class and reminds his readers of its villainous roots. The threat remains, of course.¹⁹

The English *Octovian's* concern for promulgating aristocratic values is also apparent in the romance's opening scenes where we find another character from the lowest portion of society. Octavian and his empress are an infertile couple. Much is made, especially in the northern version, of the need to produce an heir, and of the emperor's anxiety over his failure in this regard:

The seuen zere were comen and gone,
 Bot child togedir had þay none,
 Getyn bytwene þam two,
 þat aftir þam þair land moghte welde
 When þat þay drewe till elde,
 And forthi in hert þam was full woo . . .
 A sorow þan to his herte þer rane
 Forthi þat þay childir hade nane,
 Their landis to rewle one ryghte. (31-6, 43-5)

The empress suggests that the emperor dedicate an abbey to the Virgin, and soon afterwards his wife gives birth to twins. Enter the evil mother-in-law. She suggests to her son, the emperor, that someone who before couldn't father one child is unlikely to have sired two, and that what is doubly unfortunate in this case is that the empire will now fall to the issue of someone else. And she claims, in fact, that the someone else in question, the real father, is the cook's knave.

It is probably no accident that the supposed progenitor, who is merely a *garçon* in the French, is a fellow much given to energetic stoking of ovens

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downstairs: whereas the emperor's virility is obviously in question, this knave is vigorous.²⁰ As Moi points out, one of the fundamental anomalies of courtly love is that such an involved, artificial edifice is erected in pursuit of such a natural goal. In the sex act itself, and its desired outcome, neither expensive lances nor elaborate love-talking can stand in for performance. In *The Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer addresses this problem of the incompatibility of courtly and natural love, albeit in bird language. We have to imagine that, at least potentially, the sex act itself could become a moment of some anxiety for the feudal magnate. You had to produce, and you had to reproduce.

The mother-in-law offers the cook's knave a reward to creep into the empress's bed while she sleeps, and, no genius, he accepts. Then she conducts her son into the chamber, and he, not a candidate for the Dean's List himself, immediately assumes that he has been wronged. In the French the *garçon* is taken away and quietly exterminated, but in the English the emperor kills the knave on the spot by cutting off his head, another detail not in the French.²¹ The mother-in-law plays upon her son's fear of sexual impotence, and he responds savagely to what he thinks he sees. We glimpse here the possibility that the *vilein*, perhaps because of his very earthy uncourtliness, may have constituted a sexual threat to the feudal lord. The scene reveals a fundamental insecurity about love as well as sex. The *vilein* can be a sexual threat only if the woman is complicit in the outrage. Octavian and all the other males at Rome who judge her, including her own father, never question the empress's guilt. The emperor, by the way, having slaughtered the knave, mercifully allows his wife and the twins to be banished rather than killed, and eventually one of them, Florent, ends up in Paris.

The treatment of the two *vilein* figures in *Octovian* reveals both the most obvious aristocratic fear of those from below, that they will acquire economic power, and the most obscure, that the *vilein* might become a sexual rival. Each is interesting and deserves more investigation, but the remainder of the paper will concentrate on another aristocratic fear that I suppose might be situated between the other two, being neither as obvious as the economic threat nor as obscure as the sexual. As surprising as it may seem, the aristocratic class regarded the *vileins* as a group as a political threat. The disparity between the power of the feudal class and the relative powerlessness of the *vileins* makes such a fear seem preposterous, but in fact I think the aristocrats were haunted by the prospect of power falling into the hands of anyone from outside their own class, but especially the *vileins*. Only aristocrats could be trusted to use power moderately, correctly, because only they were naturally inclined to be merciful. *Vileins*, by nature unmerciful, would always use power for destructive ends.

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the "villainy" of those at the lower end of late medieval English society extended beyond vulgarity and repulsiveness to rapacity and violence, and that *vileins* could act upon these impulses not simply as individuals but as a group. In the harmonious myth of the medieval social order known as the three estates, the *vileins* are simply "those who work." In return for the physical sustenance provided by their labor, they

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receive the physical protection of "those who fight," the aristocrats, and the spiritual protection of "those who pray," the clerics. Society is essentially and ideally static according to this myth. There should be no flux, no movement up or down as there is in a class structure, as indeed there was in the Middle Ages despite the myth. In the literary genre known as estates satire, which influenced to some degree both Chaucer's *General Prologue* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the refusal of each of the three estates (other estates can also be included) to perform these basic functions of working, fighting, and praying results in social disharmony. So laborers become layabouts, wasters, destructive in effect but not especially destructive in a direct and violent way. Estates satire criticizes current conditions but finally validates the myth itself: the idea, or ideal, of a society fixed and harmonious rather than dynamic, each estate defined by the role it plays in the overall structure.

But what occasionally manifests itself in the literature, sometimes as a response to specific historical events, is another vision of society, not compatible with the estates myth, in which those who occupy the lower reaches of society must be suppressed in order that society be protected from their violent and destructive instincts. It is a vision of society based on fear and antagonism, not harmony. The most virulent expression of this vision may well be Book 1 of John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, a response to the Peasant Rising of 1381.²² In the phantasmagorical dream vision of Book 1 the dreamer Gower watches in horror as roaming bands of peasants metamorphose into varieties of ravening beasts asses, oxen, swine, dogs, cats, foxes, birds, flies, frogs. Each of these hordes in turn bloodthirstily slaughters the apparently defenseless great men of the realm until finally they are defeated through the grace of God.

Book 1 of *Vox Clamantis* was probably added later to the original work which follows in typical Gowerian prolixity. This original work is estates satire of the usual variety. The peasants who appear only briefly in Book 5 are accused of harboring resentments against the free, of being in need of forceful checks to keep them in place. But their primary fault is laziness; they are the antithesis of what they should be according to the estates myth. The peasants of Book 1, however, are murderous non-humans. There is no balance in the presentation of them. They do not respond to any

grievance, real or imagined, nor are they driven by some external force or tricked by unscrupulous leaders into violent murder. Rather, they simply reveal their true nature by changing into ferocious beasts.

Gower's frightful and frightened, if not paranoid, portrayal of the lower classes responds directly to the events of 1381. There was real bloodshed during the Rising and certain unpopular groups and individuals were attacked by the rebels. There was the apparent threat of widespread upheaval. And when they met with Richard II at Smithfield the peasant leaders presented him with proposals for political change. Whether one follows David Aers in regarding the *vilein* political agenda as essentially radical or agrees with Richard Firth Green that it was essentially conservative, what must have been clear at the time is that the *vileins* and their allies were attempting to become part of the political

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process.²³ Given their destructive nature, of course, any acquiescence to the peasants on this head was intolerable, and after giving some assurances Richard smashed the rebels completely. One could well imagine the Rising inspiring the assessment of the peasant expressed at the conclusion of Book 1 of *Vox Clamantis*:

For the peasant always lay in wait [to see] whether he by chance could bring the noble class to destruction. For his rough, boorish nature was not tempered by any affection, but he always had bitterness in his hateful heart. In his subjection the lowly plowman did not love, but rather feared and reviled, the very man who provided for him. Their very peace and quiet stirred up these men, so that this goading fear became more sharply whetted in them and their burden weighed heavily upon them. The intelligent man who guards himself will not be deceived: because of past injuries he is wary of future misfortunes.²⁴

But the idea of the *vilein* as naturally given to violence and therefore politically dangerous is not restricted to reactions to specific events.

In fact it had achieved proverbial status in later medieval England as it had in France and probably elsewhere. Jere Whiting provides ample evidence in his collection of proverbs that it is folly to give power to one of low degree.²⁵ Not always is an explanation provided as to why it would be folly, but when such an explanation is forthcoming, it often has to do with the natural cruelty of *vileins*, their propensity for violence. In a passage from Malory the proverb is given and then explained:

And as ever it is an olde sawe, "Gyeff a chorle rule and thereby he woll nat be suffysed", for whatsomeuer he be that is rewled by a vylayne borne, and the lorde of the soyle be a jantylnan born, that same vylayne shall destroy all the jeantylmen aboute hym.²⁶

The situation in Malory is that King Harmaunce had showed favor to two knights of low birth, who upon achieving sufficient power, drove out all of the king's blood relations, making things "ful dolorous."

Lydgate frequently refers to the cruelty of the lower classes, which is always unleashed by attainment of power: "What thyng mor cruel in comparisoun / Or mor vengable of will and naht off riht, / Than whan a cherl hath domynacioun."²⁷ One of his most extended expressions of this idea occurs Book 4 of *Fall of Princes* where he recounts the story of Agathodes, The Low-born Tyrant. Agathodes is the son of a potter who parlays his great beauty into high estate, eventually becoming the Duke of Syracuse. And from this high position he falls, being proud, lecherous and not just for women and cruel. With much to choose from in his moralization of this story, Lydgate focuses on the connection between low birth and a violent, unmerciful disposition. The point is made in a general way at the tale's beginning:

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On the mooste contrarious myscheeff
 Founde in this erthe, bi notable euidence,
 Is onli this: bi fortunat violence
 Whan that a wrech, cherlissh of nature,
 The stat of princis vnwarli doth recure. (4.2656-60)²⁸

The rise to prominence is here openly connected with violence. Then Lydgate draws a comparison between those of gentle blood, who are born to rule, and the low-born:

The gentil nature of a strong leoun
 To prostrat peepel of kynde is merciabill;
 For vnto all that falle afforn hym down
 His roiall puissaunce cannat be vengable.
 But cherlissh wolues, bi rigour vntrettable,
 And foltissh assis, eek of bestialite,
 Failyng resoun, braide euer on cruelte. (4.2682-88)

This point is driven home without recourse to the animal kingdom in the tale's envoy:

Gentil blood of his roial nature
 Is euer enclyned to merci & pite,
 Wher of custum thes vileyns do ther cure,
 Bi ther vsurpid & extort fals pouste
 To be vengable bi mortal cruelte,
 Thoruh hasti fumys of furious corage,
 Folwyng the techchis of ther vileyn lynage. (4.2955-61)

A clearer statement would be hard to find. The line from Chaucer that surely comes to mind here is one of his favorite dicta: "Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte." *Gentil* is glossed "noble in character" by Riverside for these instances and both Davis's *A Chaucer Glossary* and the MED support this reading.²⁹ However, in light of the well-established unpitying nature of *vileins* of all sorts, and the natural mercifulness of the nobility, we shouldn't be so quick to disambiguate *gentil* in this famous line in order to situate the sentiment it expresses in a semantic sphere concerned only with character; we exclude thereby a hint, if not an outright commendation, of social inequality in Chaucer's text.

If we bear in mind these attitudes about the *vilein's* propensity toward violent behavior that will inevitably reveal itself upon the acquisition of political power, I think we can appreciate the anxiety that resonates through the light, almost slapstick romance known as *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*.³⁰ Three of Arthur's company, Gawain, Kay, and Bishop Baldwin, are forced to seek shelter in the castle of a Carl notorious for his inhospitable treatment of guests. At the outset Kay's unmannerliness serves as a foil for Gawain, who, like the Gawain

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of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is the paragon of chivalrous style and courtesy. However, it is the opposition of Gawain and the Carl that quickly becomes central. The porter of the castle warns the three visitors that "My lorde can no corttessye,/ ze schappyth notte wyttout a wellony" (193-94). Upon meeting his host, the courteous Gawain attempts to kneel, only to receive the following rebuke:

Lett be þi knellynge, gentyll knyzt,
 Thow logost wytt a carll to-nyzt,
 I swer, by sennt Iohnn,
 For her no corttessy þou schalt have
 But carllus corttessy, so God me save
 For serttus I can non. (274-79)

The visitors are put to a series of tests by their host. Kay and Baldwin fail almost immediately, so only Gawain remains a focus of the Carl's attention. The tests seem designed to force Gawain to violate the Carl's position as host, yet it is only by accepting the Carl's challenges that Gawain can prove himself an exemplary guest, and, in the bargain, truly courteous. At one point Gawain must run at the Carl with a spear; the Carl ducks out of the way at the last moment. In the evening he is required to lie in the Carl's bed next to his beautiful wife, but not to touch her. Gawain barely succeeds, even with the Carl looking on. Then he is required to spend the night with the Carl's beautiful daughter, which proves to be no hardship for man or woman. The ultimate test comes next morning; the Carl

commands that Gawain behead him.³¹ Reluctantly Gawain obeys, but once beheaded the Carl does not die but rather is changed into a man of Gawain's height (399 of B) and of his disposition as well. He becomes the most chivalrous and hospitable host imaginable, exactly the opposite of what he was as the Carl. The Carl explains to Gawain after his transformation that he was, in fact, a victim of enchantment:

Gawaine, God blese thee,
 For thou hast deliuered mee.
 From all false witchcrafft
 I am deliuered att the last.
 By nigromance thus was I shapen
 Till a knight of the Round Table
 Had with a sword smiten of my head,
 If he had grace to doe that deede. (401-08 of B)

There is no known source for the poem, and it may well have been made to serve as an eponymy for the place name Carlisle: a poetical answer to the question, who put the "carl" in Carlisle?³² This delightful possibility shouldn't obscure the importance of the Carl's position in this story. There is more at stake in this romance than the Carl's personal transformation. The fundamental social

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anomaly, presented without comment when Baldwin suggests that they seek shelter with the Carl, is that a carl, any carl, is in charge of a castle. Obviously this is not a usual state of affairs, nor should we accept it merely as a fanciful premise on which the story rests.

The Carl's assertion that he lacks *corttesy* proves to be no idle boast. He obviously lacks the courtly demeanor and style, what with his "chekes longe and vesage brade, / Cambur nose . . . moztz moche" and so on, not to mention an appetite that matches his size: he drinks his wine from a nine-gallon bowl. Besides his beautiful wife and daughter he keeps company with some ferocious beasts who momentarily threaten the visitors. We learn later that the Carl used these animals to slaughter his guests, whose bones are stored in a charnel house in the castle (529-37). The Carl's castle then represents a place where the violent and destructive nature of the *vilein* holds sway; *carllus corttesy* is force and violence and it is antithetical to the social intercourse of courtly society. In this poem, then, we have an upside-down world where the *vilein* is in control.

In narrative structure *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* is almost an inversion of the common romance narrative type known as the "Fair Unknown."³³ In fact we could call it a romance of the "Fair Known". In the usual pattern, to use Stephen Knight's loaded terms, an "incursionary thug" forces himself into an established court and acquires power, possessions, and eventually the chivalric style, which all turn out to fit his true noble ancestry that is eventually revealed. In *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* Gawain, representing chivalric values, comes to a court of an "established thug" where such values are despised. Outright violence would be useless against the Carl's huge physical size and strength, his capacity to control wild beasts, and his uncanny ability to read minds, so Gawain employs the power of courtesy, that hallmark of the aristocrat. But courtesy, in fact, turns out to sanction both violence against a rival, the Carl, and sexual acquisitiveness. Because he courteously perseveres and succeeds in all the tests Gawain achieves that which Knight says is usually allotted to the Fair Unknown: a woman, the Carl's beautiful daughter, a prized possession, a white palfrey for her to ride upon, and honor, which accrues to him for having successfully transformed the Carl and thereby cleansed the castle.

Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle reveals a romance response to the unsettling idea of *vileins* in power. It confirms that the antisocial behavior characteristic of that group would remain unchanged by the acquisition of power, and that the harmonious relations of idealized feudal society would be replaced by relations based on applications of brute force. Moreover, in its fairy-tale-like resolution it reveals the desire that, however things may appear, power will finally reside with the naturally courteous, open-handed aristocracy who alone are fit to govern. Although he protests all the while, Gawain, in effect, kills the Carl. And it seems clear from the poem that the Carl, in effect, wants to be killed, because he is really an enchanted nobleman imprisoned in a Carl's body. Gawain does not change the Carl into something new but rather returns the enchanted aristocrat, the rightful possessor of the castle, to his original shape,

position, and behavior from which he had been so grievously shifted. Courtesy is more

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redemptive than transformatory. It works on those to whom it comes "naturally."

By its magical ending *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* attempts to confirm the position of the aristocratic class in the face of perceived political opposition. In a less magical world such easy resolutions are harder to come by. Compared to the awesome power of the Carl, Gawain's courtesy seems a puny weapon. Although aristocratic desire and the generic opportunities of romance enclose the Carl and finally dissolve him, he is for a time, with his huge and powerful body and malevolent attitude, with his castle and his beautiful wife and daughter, a specter from an aristocratic nightmare.

Notes

1. *The Romaunt of the Rose and Le Roman de la Rose: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. Ronald Sutherland (Oxford, 1967), ll. 3698-703. The translation is that of Harold W. Robbins (New York, 1962), p. 80.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London, 1991), p. 30. The whole of Eagleton's book stands as a testament to the difficulty of comprehending the concept "ideology" and the importance of trying nevertheless to do so. This one-line definition is a clear and useful starting point for the argument of this paper, but it cannot comprehend the complexity of the concept, a complexity that the paper tries to address.
3. Sutherland, ll. 1928-31; Robbins, p. 39. The Middle English *Romaunt* expands this passage (Sutherland, ll. 1983-92): I loue the bothe and preise, Sens that thyn answer dothe me ese, For thou answered so curtesly. For nowe I wote wel vtterly That thou arte gentyll, by the speche, For though a man ferre wolde seche, He shulde not fynden, in certayne, No suche answer of no vilayne. For suche a worde ne myght nought Isse out of a vylayns thought.
4. Sutherland, ll. 2078-79. Johan Huizinga makes the point that while the *Romance of the Rose* "does not deny the ideal of courtesy," what stand opposed to hatred, villainy, felony, and other vices are not the ethical virtues supposedly fostered by the old ideal of courtly love but rather "an aristocratic character" which is to be cynically used to conquer the woman, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924; rpt. New York, 1949), p. 114-

15. He refers primarily to Jean's continuation, but the facileness of Guillaume probably implies this view as well.

5. Sutherland, ll. 2090-98.

6. "Danger" is at once a *vilein* and an aspect of the Beloved. There may be much to explore here. It is one of the more mysterious and difficult figures in the allegory of the poem.

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7. C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origin of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals*, 939-1210 (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 9.

8. Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984).

9. "Desire in Language: Andreas Capellanus and the Controversy of Courtly Love," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton, 1986), pp. 16, 17.

10. Investigation of the legitimacy of psychoanalytic analogies for the analysis of medieval cultural formations, whether institutional or quasi-institutional, must be deferred. It seems to be a fundamental assumption for most scholars who study ideology, and its impact is apparent in this paper as well.

11. "The Social Function of Middle English Romance," in *Medieval Literature*, pp. 99-122. Knight neglects to discuss the audience of English romance, which is unfortunate, because if they are directed, as has been stated so often, toward an emergent bourgeois reader, then using them as evidence of courtly or chivalric ideology becomes problematical or at least complicated. In fact, various recent commentators have begun to question the assumption that the audience of most of the Middle English romances was bourgeois. A. G. S. Edwards stresses the insecure grounds for making any sweeping assumptions about romance audience or audiences in "Middle English Romance: The Limits of Editing, the Limits of Criticism," in *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretation*, ed. Tim William Machan (Binghamton, 1991), pp. 95-96. Derek Pearsall argues for a wide variety of audiences for these works, including audiences composed of the gentry, in "Middle English Romance and Its Audiences," in *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English*, for Johan Gerritsen, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes (Groningen, 1985), pp. 37-47. John Simon offers a number of reasons why we might consider the audience of what have often been described as "popular" romances to have actually been aristocratic; "Northern Octavian and the Question of Class," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale (Cambridge, England, 1991), pp. 105-11.

12. *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparren, EETS OS 289 (London, 1986). More precisely the text is known as the "northern" *Octovian*, which exists in two medieval versions, the earlier in Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 91 (the Lincoln Thornton MS) and the later in CUL MS Ff. 2.38. The significantly different "southern" version, extant in a single manuscript, Cotton Caligula A.II, has also been edited by McSparren, *Octovian Imperator*, Middle English Texts 11 (Heidelberg, 1979). Unfortunately two folios lost from the Thornton MS contained the two episodes treated here, so the quotations are from the CUL version.

13. See McSparren's note to l. 576 of the northern version, *Octavian*, p. 189.

14. McSparren, ed., *Octovian Imperator*, p. 46.

15. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 124-27.

16. Pearsall insisted on a bourgeois audience for most Middle English romances in "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Mediaeval Studies* 27

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(1965), 91-116, reprinted in *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge, England, 1988), pp. 11-35. However, see his later discussion referred to in n. 11.

17. John Simon's analysis of the "Clement" episodes in the northern *Octovian* are not dissimilar from that found in this paper, but he assesses Clement's characterization quite differently. Even when Clement performs what Simon calls "heroic" acts towards the end of the romance, their burlesque quality would be hard to miss, and his "heroism," therefore, is thoroughly undercut. Simon does not deal with Clement's surname.

18. All subsequent quotations from the northern *Octovian* are from the Thornton version. *Schaweberecke* is a form of the word "scabbard."

19. Simon likewise sees ruling class anxieties expressed in this text, although he perceives these feelings as a general response to the cultural and political crisis in late fourteenth century England; his is certainly a defensible reading.

20. In her note to l. 122 of the southern version, McSparren suggests mistranslation as the possible source of the change from French *garçon* to the more specific and socially lower cook's knave. At one point in this episode in the French text that must be close to the source of the English, the twin children are called *quistrons*. This word's primary meaning in Old French was "scullion, kitchen boy," and its Middle English reflex, with the same meaning, occurs in the southern text at l. 154. Perhaps, therefore, a translator mistook the word used of the children as a reference to the *garçon*. However, even if this ingenious explanation is correct, it remains clear that the degrading spectacle of an empress and a scullion in bed together must have caught the imagination of the English redactor.

21. While the knave's head comes off in all the versions of the English *Octovian*, there are some interesting variants. The northern version in CUL Ff.2.38 has *The herre in hys honde he nome:/ The hede smote of thare ./ He caste hyt ageyne into the bedd*; the early printed version of the romance in Huntington Library MS 14615 resembles the CUL version. The Thornton is more condensed and more specific as to where the severed head ends up: *þe hede vp by þe hare he hente / And caste it till hir thare* (ll. 176-77). The southern version is more grisly and more detailed. After severing the head, the emperor *drew þat hedde . . . Into þe lady barm*, that is, "placed (?tossed) that head into the lady's lap," and then he suggests *Pley þe with at ball* (ll. 209-11). Given the southern variant, one wonders if the colorless *thare* in the northern versions might once have been *share* "pubic region, groin."

22. *Vox Clamantis* is found in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1899-1902). It has been translated and annotated in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle, 1962).

23. Richard Firth Green, "John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Medieval Studies at Minnesota* 4 (Minneapolis,

1992), pp. 176-200. Aers voices his objections to Green's views in his review of this Volume in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 15 (1993), 213. For a remarkably different assessment of Green's essay, see J. R. Maddicott's review of the same Volume in *Medium 'vum* 52 (1993), 331-32.

24. Gower, *Latin Works*, ed. Stockton, pp. 94-95.

25. Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, England, 1968). There are a number of relevant proverbs gathered alphabetically under *churl*; see also S158, T188, and V37.

26. *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1948), 2:712.

27. Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, Part 3, EETS OS 123 (Oxford, 1924), Book 6, ll. 778-80.

28. *Fall of Princes*, Part 2, EETS OS 122 (Oxford, 1924), Book 4, ll. 2656-60.

29. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987): "Knight" A1761, "Merchant" E1986, "Squire" F479, "Legend" F503 (G191). *A Chaucer Glossary*, eds. Norman Davis, Douglas Gray, Patricia Ingham, and Anne Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford, 1979; rpt.1983).

30. *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, ed. Auvo Kurvinen, *Annales Academi' Scientiarum Fennicæ Ser.B*, 71, 2 (Helsinki, 1951). There are two versions of the poem, although they are frequently regarded as two separate works in bibliographical surveys. The only medieval version is found in MS Porkington 10; the other is in the Percy Folio, BL Additional 27879. Using traditional linguistic analysis, Kurvinen dates the "composition" of the romance to the second half of the fourteenth century (pp. 52-53). The word *carl* derives from the Scandinavian cognate of OE *ceorl* it refers to men of low estate.

31. The account of this test does not survive in the Porkington version, where the Carl lamely undergoes a self-conversion in the morning. Kurvinen believes that the beheading of the Carl is essential to the story, and its absence from Porkington is one of the main proofs that the Percy version does not derive from the earlier extant one (p. 55).

B32. In fact the name is Welsh and the syllabic division etymologically falls between the *r* and the first *l*; the first element derives from the Welsh word for castle while the origin of the second element is obscure. See A.M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F.M. Stenton, and Bruce Dickins, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, Part 1, EPNS 20 (Cambridge, England, 1950), pp. 41-42, and A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Part 1, EPNS 25 (Cambridge, England,1956), p. 76. Kurvinen treats extensively possible analogues for the various episodes in the poem (pp. 80-111), but there is no known source.

33. Stephen Knight, "Social Function," p. 105, describes the pattern as follows: "The 'fair unknown' is at first and in French a threatening figure, uncouth but strong and determined; he learns to be courteous as well as powerful, wins a lady, property and honour . . . Somewhere along the way he becomes known, and it is revealed that he is not the incursionary thug that his

presentation has implied, but in fact a member of the aristocracy. A crucial point is that the later the revelation comes, and the more abuse and anxiety aroused by the figure along the way, the stronger is the realization of social advancement through martial force. Through the 'fair unknown' there rises to consciousness the reality of social *arrivisme* in its threatening reality; but the threat is also culturally resolved."