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**Patterns of Coherence: A Study of the Narrative Technique in *King Horn*****Esha Niyogi De**

Through the years critics have viewed *King Horn* as a primarily formulaic assemblage of "archetypic romance motifs" (Sands 15), linked with minimal transitions and few attempts at motivic and causal analysis. In a recent study upon cohesion in *King Horn* Mary Hynes-Berry discovers in the narrator a "situational omniscience" that leads to the "elimination of concern for person and motive" (654). This viewpoint gains support from the popular theory that *King Horn* originates in oral performance. A poem originating in oral performance is likely to be tailored to the limited receptive and retentive capacities of a listening audience. In their book upon "oral improvisation," Quinn and Hall note the oral origin of the poem as the probable reason for the stylistic inferiority of *King Horn* (Quinn and Hall 33).

But this claim about the oral origin of the poem would be disputed by many. As Dieter Mehl states, the conventional opening of the poem should not be "taken as evidence of oral composition and transmission." He instead discovers in this romance "the hand of a conscious artist" (Mehl 50). In a recent work John Ganim suggests that certain techniques employed in *King Horn* and typically associable with "oral and formulaic poetry" could have been utilized by a lettered poet only because he was "working in a literary tradition of limited vocabulary" (Ganim 45). It is with Ganim that criticism upon the narrative technique of *King Horn* takes a new turn.

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Ganim approaches the poem not only for its catalogue of romance codes, but also for "allusive" suggestions of "motivations and tensions" that underlie the surface narrative (38), and his work provides a starting point for the present study. However, he restricts his study to instances of "evocative symbolism" in the text. He thus concludes that the poem has "local successes" but remains on the whole, "flimsy and one-dimensional" (39).

In this paper I instead propose that *King Horn* is throughout interspersed with signs and clues of complex motive and cause, of subtle psychological implications, and of ironic and symbolic undertones that operate to modify the formalized narrative. Through a systematic reading of such embedded layers of signification I shall hope to discover certain deep-seated thematic patterns that bring order and symmetry not only to the surface action of the poem but to its overall meaning.

Such a systematic reading of the "signs and clues" of embedded meaning demands a sufficient methodology of study. Of immediate use to this end is Umberto Eco's formulation of "undercoding" as a system of signification distinct from the "completely coded elementary signs" that seemingly constitute the discourse (*Looking for a Logic of Culture* 10). In *The Theory of Semiotics* Eco defines undercodes as "the operation by means of which, in the absence of reliable pre-established rules, certain macroscopic portions of certain texts are provisionally assumed to be pertinent units of a code in formation..." (Eco 135-36). Eco's reference to "macroscopic portions" of texts points to broad significative designs which are distinguishable within a construct, although their meaning may be only vaguely comprehensible to the "decoder". As he postulates elsewhere, such underlying designs are identifiable only

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though the "correlations between macroscopic segments" (*Looking for a Logic of Culture* 10). It is my purpose then to discover in the text of *King Horn* verbal and narrational clues which permit the audience glimpses of such preexisting thematic correlations.

The audience of *King Horn* comes upon an occasional ambiguous word or phrase, a significant gesture or fragmentary episode which is set slightly apart from the mainstream narrative, perhaps by a touch of irony or by affecting subtle modification of the story line. As R. W. Hanning notes in a recent article, "Audience as Co-creator in the First Chivalric Romances": "the audience of a chivalric romance must constantly adjust its focus on the fast moving events before it, shift quickly from a posture of involvement to one of detachment or even criticism" (16). Hanning concludes that a chivalric romance, in its telling, creates its own "audience", who then co-create meaning with the author (16). Faced with an ambiguous or autoreflective segment, or the significant juxtaposition of details, the audience, then, learns to detect patterns of meaning and establish correlations. By this means, the audience is engaged in the "tentative and hypothetical gesture" of formulating "undercodes" (*The Theory of Semiotics* 135). Furthermore, this process of inference is not an independent act but takes place within a metasemiotic frame of reference. For author and audience of medieval romances alike operate within certain pre-established cultural and generic frames. The audience brings to the reading of a romance certain preformed expectations, both generic and contextual, which very likely will direct their interpretive capability. As audience to a medieval romance they will examine the text for central romance concerns, such as the hero's struggle for

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mastery over a hostile environment, the hero's growth to maturity, or conflict between the hero's public and private roles. Moreover, as audience to the specific story of *Horn*, their expectation will be determined partly by the context.

The following analysis takes as certain pre-established cultural and contextual bases for the audiential reading of *King Horn*. It then looks to select passages in an attempt to trace the operation of "undercoding" or audiential co-creation which permits insight into the orchestration of tone and embedded meaning in the poem. By this means it comes to deep-seated thematic patterns that underlie the action-packed, formulaic surface story.

*King Horn* opens with a description of Horn's background, interspersed with minstrel tags praising the hero. The first break in this sequence occurs at line 24. The narrator notes in an aside that of the two beloved companions of Horn, Athulf is indeed the best but Fikenhild is the worst. In itself the statement is a forecast typical of the romance structure. But it sheds ironic light on Horn's gullibility in viewing Fikenhild as a "faire gome" like

the rest of his companions. A degree of innocence is discovered in Horn which entails a lack of control over his environment. In this light Fikenhild's placement at the start of the poem becomes meaningful. Fikenhild introduces in Horn's life the element of disorder which Horn must master before he can fulfill his destiny as exemplary king, hero and Christian and thereby attain maturity.

Lines 31-60 provide a second test-case for "undercoding". The passage begins with an image of Horn's father, the "gode king" Murry who is out with two companions on a beautiful "someres day" for his habitual pleasure ride. This tranquil image is dispersed by the image of the

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Saracens' ship which Murry spots by the shore. The action then sharply accelerates through a series of brief scenes which culminate in catastrophe. Murry and his two men soon forfeit their kingdom to the boatful of Saracens. To a perceptive audience Murry's description as the "gode king" may appear faintly ironic in light of subsequent events. The absence of an adequate transition between the picture of Murry on his pleasure ride and the alien ship by the shore is also an indirect comment on the nature of Murry's kingship. It could indicate an excessive degree of relaxation and lack of preparedness in the kingdom which invites disaster. Thus, in practice, King Murry's "goodness" approaches Horn's innocent trust, indicating the vulnerability of this kingdom to hostile force. To a perspicacious audience these two passages could combine to disclose deep-seated causes for the usurpation of the kingdom by the Saracens, and Horn's consequent harassment. Such incidents, positioned early in the poem, induce a romance audience to a sense of "plot", establishing the need for the hero's growth to maturity and a concurrent mastery over his environment.

Line 63 introduces a stock "usurpation episode", complete with minstrel tags of lament. We hear of churches falling to the pagans and the people of Suddene forsaking their true faith in fear. We hear of Horn's mother Godhild alone in her subterranean hideout, spending her days in ardent prayer for her son. And we also know that Horn and his twelve peers are exiled by the pagans. The narrator suitably concludes this tale of woe by lamenting that Horn had never before been in such distress. However, certain elements in this episode undercut this impression of defeat and disgrace. The narrator notes that Horn's God-given looks initially save him from death. A godlike stature is of course

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the stock attribute of a romance hero and the outward sign of his moral superiority. Predictably, a shrewd Saracen amir sees Horn's looks as a real threat to the pagan power. Consequently he is exiled. If the pagans stand as a visible threat to Murry and Horn, Horn's exemplary characteristics are, then, equally a danger to their evil force. In sum, at this point, Horn appears to be treading a thin line between potential mastery over his environment and victimization to the same. If to the audience of a medieval romance triumph is predestined for the hero with super-human attributes, for the audience of this romance the hero's praises are ironically qualified by the initial image of his vulnerability to Fikenhild and the Saracens. We see, then, how a conventional narratorial comment upon Horn's good looks, or a fragment of the ensuing episode, can connect through audient reading, with previous episodes to indicate the underlying tension between the generic destiny of the romance hero and the context-bound suspenseful destiny of one such hero.

I now move on to the second complication in Horn's life, his involvement with princess Rymenhild, daughter of King Aylmar who has offered asylum to the exiled Horn. At this time Horn's royal identity is still a well-kept secret. Horn's divine looks and exemplary qualities gain him a secure position at Aylmar's court under the tutelage of Athelbrus, who undertakes to train him in knightly pursuits. The impression we get of Horn's growing sense of vocation is disturbed, however, with the mention of Rymenhild's "wild" passion for Horn. Ganim postulates that unlike later English romances which prominently feature the conflict between the hero's public and private selves, *King Horn* masters them separately, and "the contradictions, though marked, are minimized"

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(45). Ganim, then, does not register the "undercoded" configurations of such a conflict. A conflict between Horn's public vocation and private commitment is not only central to the meaning of the poem but is correlated with the larger movement of his progress towards maturity.

Line 256, which abruptly introduces Rymenhild's passion into the even pace of Horn's education, is a first sign of developing tension. To an audience familiar with the typical romance concern with the hero's public and private selves such tension is cue to further complication. At the outset, Rymenhild is the aggressive wooer who, in a sense, threatens Horn with total absorption of his being. Athelbrus' reaction is a clue to this threat. When Athelbrus uses a substitution trick in an attempt to shield Horn from a relationship that may incur the King's wrath, he seems also keen to preserve him from an engulfing private relationship. His words of self-justification to Rymenhild are just ambiguous enough to suggest both these intentions. As guardian to Horn, says Athelbrus, he is duty-bound to keep him away from one who would compel Horn to engage solely with her in "pleye". If Horn's vulnerability to Fikenhild had created one kind of obstruction, Rymenhild's devouring love appears to pose another in Horn's growth to his destiny as ideal knight and ruler. As the narrative will disclose, however, Horn as exemplary romance hero must achieve a balance and control of both his private and public selves. Until he can do so, his struggles and oscillations will continue.

But events soon take a turn, when Horn refuses Rymenhild's marriage proposal on account of his "low birth". The passage that follows is a fair instance of embedded meaning suggested

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through selective narration. Three scenes are projected in quick succession: Rymenhild swoons; Horn enfolds her in his arms, explaining his reservations and also indicating the situation can change if he is knighted; she recovers and gives a joyful affirmative. The acute compression of episodes questions the very realism of the scene. Strictly speaking, she could not have heard Horn or responded if she were faint. She must have recovered while Horn spoke. The author omits the intermediary steps of her recovery to capture the emotive juncture when she responds:

Rymenhild that sweete thing

Wakede of hire swowing. (447-48)

Such a distribution of images permits the audience a focus upon the intrinsic cause of her physical and mental recovery: the hope that comes to her

through Horn's change in attitude and embrace. Rymenhild's total emotional dependence upon Horn is hereby obliquely established.

Why does Horn claim knighthood at this point? Once again the surface narrative does not disclose motive. However, in light of the foregoing analysis this episode may be read for subtle psychological by-play. Rymenhild's streamlined passion has threatened to absorb Horn into a purely individual existence. But Horn must reclaim his existence as chivalric hero and fulfill his responsibility as king. He does so through manipulation of Rymenhild's emotional dependence on him. This suggests to the discerning audience the operation of a larger thematic movement. At this time Horn is still struggling to gain mastery over his environment he is prepared to employ any instrument in his power to attain the desired control.

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Horn briefly appears to approach a mature fusion of his public and private selves. Rymenhild's ring becomes his constant companion in the battles against the Saracens and brings him moral support and courage. But subsequent events undercut this development.

After his return from combat Horn is discovered by Aylmar, lying with Rymenhild in her chamber. Aylmar's informer is Fikenhild who, by this means, arranges for Horn's exile. Certain elements in this episode clue the audience into possible causes behind this catastrophe. Horn here seems to resemble the fish in Rymenhild's dream, "caught" and absorbed in the "net" of an engrossing bond. The word *shonde*, meaning "harm", reiterated through these passages in connection with Horn, indicates the inevitable result of such an engrossing preoccupation. In real terms Horn now stands unguarded against such danger elements as Fikenhild, and the result is inevitable.

However, Rymenhild's dream featured a fish breaking out of the net. Predictably, Horn's exile brings him to Ireland where he quickly regains public acclaim for his looks and exemplary qualities. Contrastively, Horn's looks were scarcely mentioned in the course of his affair with Rymenhild, which instead focused upon her devouring passion. In Ireland Horn not only proves his chivalric prowess but partially fulfills his mission as hero and king through revenge upon his father's assassin. But he also avoids all contact with Rymenhild, making no mention of his betrothal even when he is offered the hand of the Irish princess. Once again his motive for such behaviour is not made clear. Instead a sorry image of Rymenhild is abruptly introduced at line 929, in sharp contrast to the scenes of Horn's success at the Irish court.

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Rymenhild was in Westernesse

With well muchel sorinesse. (929-30)

If in Westernesse Horn stood in danger of engrossment in a private existence, in Ireland he seems to stand in danger of total absorption in the vocations of hero and king. If a balance is underway between the public and private selves of Horn, it is still far from achieved.

The message of Rymenhild's impending marriage brings a turn in events. Why, if he has not previously told the Irish king of Rymenhild, does he do so now? Once again reasons for this must be inferred by the audience from the telling of the story. As defender of the Irish court Horn now seems to be in a position to turn to the king with a legitimate claim for help in rescuing Rymenhild. Furthermore, for the first time in the story Horn is ready to utilize his acquired public position to aid his private concern. For he now no longer feels it necessary to conceal his private inclinations. As proven knight and responsible potential ruler he is now prepared to acquire competence over all the facets of his life.

Select images in the following passages valorize this line of reasoning. For these images clue the audience into Horn's growing control over his destiny. Until now the sea has mostly been to Horn a symbol of transience, of aimless wandering and exile from his rightful position in the world. From this time on the sea takes him to specific places. At this time it drives him right to Westernesse and Rymenhild. Yet Horn, in his haste, beats the sea to his destination, striding through the last few feet of water in a visible gesture of mastery over his surroundings. As he suggests to Rymenhild indirectly, he is now no longer the fish helplessly entangled in a net, but the fisher

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both physically and mentally competent to take charge of the situation.

Horn's growing sense of control over his public and private selves is first evidenced in his Voluntary disclosure of his royal identity and his promise to marry Rymenhild only when he regains his kingdom. He now has the confidence to clearly state that his goal is to acquire both the kingdom and the queen. Furthermore, from this time forth Horn encounters noticeably better fortune. Even the knight who stands guard at Suddene is a prisoner of the Saracens and his friend Athulf's own father. In a sense his growing competence in the sphere of his personal life also permits Horn a symbolic dominance in the surrounding world. To the audience of chivalric romance, this progressive control over self and environment signals the approach of an achieved maturity.

But Horn faces a final test of his "maturity". He fulfills his life's mission by retaking his kingdom from the Saracens, but he then quite forgets his promise to rejoin Rymenhild and instead spends his days feasting. Horn's evil star, Fikenhild, seizes this opportunity to force King Aylmar's consent for his own marriage to Rymenhild. As a result Horn is visited with a nightmare. Mary Hynes-Berry comments upon this: "the dream indicates that Horn has not just passively accepted her passionate wooing, but now he himself feels a spiritual bond between them" (659). For the first time Horn discloses a spontaneous "spiritual" thirst which can shake him out of an unresisting surrender to public commitment and success. Horn's present distraction is thus proved to be temporary, not a serious threat to his private existence. From now on developments in the action are predictable, the fit conclusion to his struggle into maturity. Horn is married to Rymenhild and ascends to the

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position of exemplary ruler who brings peace to his own and surrounding kingdoms.

It is clear that a careful study of the ambiguity in a line or speech, the exact location of a segment within the text, or the selection and juxtaposition of lines and episodes may disclose not only discrete configurations of meaning but also large thematic correlations that bring to this romance a coherence unavailable to the cursory reading of the surface narrative. Utilizing Eco's system of "undercodes," this paper traces the line of interpretation a medieval romance audience would very likely take, given their pre-established cultural and generic expectations. By this means, the action-packed surface story of *King Horn* discloses central romance concerns like the hero's struggle to master his environment and come to terms with the divergent demands of his public and private lives and his final growth to maturity as the exemplary king, knight, and lover.

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