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BLOOMGARDEN, Ira, 1941-
NORTHERN MIDDLE ENGLISH ARTHURIAN ROMANCE
AND ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

The City University of New York, Ph.D., 1971
Language and Literature, general

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1971

NORTHERN MIDDLE ENGLISH ARTHURIAN
ROMANCE AND ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York

1970

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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CONTENTS

I	Aims and Methods	p.	5
II	The Historical Background of Northern Romance	p.	33
III	The Historical Literature of the North	p.	67
IV	The Charlemagne Romances	p.	98
V	The Gawain Romances	p.	128
VI	The Arthurian Romances	p.	198
VII	Conclusions	p.	275
	Sources Consulted	p.	295

CHAPTER ONE:
AIMS AND METHODS

Middle English romances have been intensively studied during the last century and a half, but as literary productions they have inspired less critical commentary than the romances of the continental languages. Too much of this criticism is based on either hasty readings or preconceived notions. Yet one of the works, Gawain and the Green Knight, is among the most scrutinized pieces of English literature. However, the romance was not written in a literary vacuum, for the poet drew on a good deal of tradition in shaping his work. But the common critical approach has been to treat the poem as unique, since most English romances were written for lower class and bourgeois audiences, were artistically crude, and seemed to lack any serious purpose.

In fact, as this study will attempt to demonstrate, the only unusual aspect of Gawain and the Green Knight is its degree of excellence; that is, its virtues are, to a lesser extent, shared by many other romances. Its courtliness, metrical fluency, richness of description, structure, humor, and seriousness are all found in romances that were written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the north of England and the border regions of Scotland. By the "North" I refer to the geographical area north of the Humber, west of the Trent and including most of the Scottish Lowlands. Although this region contained three dialects, Northern, Northwest Midlands, and, after 1400, Scottish, during the Middle Ages, it formed a homogenous cultural entity.

The North has always held a distinctive place in British history and has always possessed a unique culture. During the close of the Middle Ages, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the social and political conditions of the region profoundly affected the chivalric romances that were written in this area, and to a large degree accounted for their special qualities.

The distinctiveness of Northern culture is well attested in contemporary *English literature*. Chaucer, a London man, found Northern speech so special that he used it as a humorous touch in the Reeve's Tale to characterize the two Cambridge students.¹ Later, the Parson, in his prologue, warns his audience "But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man, / I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre."² Since the Parson is a man of the South, he cannot compose alliterative poems, a sure indication that Chaucer was at least aware of the literary tastes of the North.

Our most valuable spokesmen for the Northern distinctiveness of the fourteenth century are Ralph Higden and John Trevisa. Higden's explanation of the qualities of Northern speech points up the Southerner's awareness of the remoteness and strangeness of the region:³

Tota lingua Northimbrorum, maxime in Eboraco ita stridet incondita, quod nos australes eam vix intelligere possumus; quod puto propter proper iugem remotionem regum Anglorum ab illis partibus, qui magis ad austrum diversati, magno auziliatorum manu pergunt. Frequentioris autem morae in austrinis partibus quam in borealibus causa poetest esse gleba feracior, plebs numerosior, urbes

insigniores, portus accommodatiores.

Trevisa expands, but does not alter Higden's observations:

Al þe longage of þe Norþhumbres, and specialych at 3ork, ys so scharp, slyttyng and frotyng, and unschape, þat we Souperon men may þat longage unneþe undurstonde. Y trowe þat þat ys bycause þat a buþ ny3 to strange men, and aliens þat spekeþ strangelych, and also bycause þat þe kynges of Engelond woneþ alwey fer fram þat contray; and 3ef a gob to þ norþ contray, a gob wiþ gret help and strengthe. ϕ e cause why a buþ more in þe souþ contray þan in þe norþ may be betre cornlond, more people, more noble cytes, and more profytable havenes.

Mossé points out that this passage is borrowed from the Gesta Pontificum of William of Malmesbury, which dates from 1125, and thus is not an accurate picture of England in the fourteenth century.⁴ But the linguistic evidence is certainly valid, and, as we shall see, the military power of the North posed a continual threat to the monarchy in the later part of the century.

A hundred years later, Caxton's version omits Higden's and Trevisa's mention of the difficulty of royal passage in the area.⁵ The hostility of the North, so noted in the fourteenth century, had been tempered by the later part of the fifteenth century. But, since this is the only passage Caxton alters, we must assume that the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of the North still remained.

A century or more after Caxton, the concept of Northern distinctiveness was still alive and made its best known appearance in Shakespeare's *Hotspur*. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider all of Shakespeare's sources in constructing his portrait of

Hotspur, but they certainly must go beyond Holinshead's rather colorless portrayal. For example, Hotspur's "speaking thick which nature made his blemish" is an invention of the author's, does not appear in the chronicles, and perhaps refers to his Northumberland burr.⁶

Still more significant is the character himself. Humphreys suggests that Shakespeare might have been acquainted with one of the ballad versions of the Battle of Otterburn, which gave him a particular color for the Percy story.⁷ Certainly the impetuosity that so marks Harry Percy in the play is precisely the outstanding quality of the historical figure. The pursuit of honor that drives Shakespeare's character drove the real man, although seriously wounded, to engage in a desperate battle against Earl Douglas just to recover his captured standard.⁸

Shakespeare endows the character in addition to boldness with some of the backwardness and uncouthness traditionally associated with the North. Hotspur delights in his avoidance of fashion, his artlessness, and his distaste for music. He is, above all, a rough provincial, not ignorant but scornful of the ways of the court and of elaborate artificial manners. He detests the "popinjay" of the court with his "talk so like a waiting-gentle-woman" and his concept of chivalry so utterly divorced from the battlefield. This side of the character is, as far as we know, invention, for Percy's character off the field of combat is nowhere mentioned in any of the contemporary histories. But the very roughness and provinciality of Shakespeare's

"northern youth" is perhaps based on contemporary stereotypes of the Northern character, stereotypes that still exist. George Orwell has remarked that "when I first went to Yorkshire, some years ago, I imagined that I was going to a country of boors."⁹

In the opinion, then, of both the historians and the poets of England, the North occupied a special place in British culture and produced people who were considered rather backward and rough by the rest of England. We should therefore expect the literature of the region to be similarly distinctive.

One of the reasons why this distinctiveness has only rarely been examined is that Middle English romance has almost never been studied on a regional basis. The standard study usually takes its structure from Wells' Manual, which divides romance into the Matters of Rome, Britain, and France, or according to type of composition, for example the composite romances. But regional differences can occasionally cut across the differences in substance, and shape romances according to the tastes of the audience.

Another common classification is meter. The best example of this type of study is Oakden's Alliterative Poetry in Middle English. Certainly the metrical form of a work affects its sens, especially in such a school as the alliterative. But, as one critic had noted, the gulf between the Northern and Southern or Midlands alliterative traditions is immense.¹⁰ William of Palerne and the Alliterative Morte Arthure share the same metrical form, but the sens of the works and

the outlook of the poets are completely opposed. Rather, the concepts of the Alliterative Morte poet are much more congruent with those of Barbour, who writes at about the same time, in the same region, but who uses octosyllabic couplets instead of alliteration.

The inadequacies of such a purely metrical classification can be clearly seen in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, where the English Arthurian romances are divided into alliterative and rhymed and prose romances. The effects of such a division are to separate such obviously related works as the Awntyrs of Arthur and the Avowyngge of Arthur, and to juxtapose together such unrelated romances as Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and Lovelich's Merlin.

It would not be very helpful to study the works by date, for the flourishing of Northern romance is a comparatively late phenomenon. Any study of late fourteenth century English literature must come to grips with the fact that contemporary with the French school of Chaucer and Gower, for whom romance was largely a dead genre, and the Southern romance writers, who dwelt on the marvellous and the stereotyped motifs of a dying tradition, was a school of romance in the North that produced the supreme examples of English chivalric literature. This phenomenon can be explained neither by classification according to subject matter, nor by classification according to meter, nor by a recent attempt to classify Middle English romance by length. It can best be explained by relating the literary distinctiveness of the North to the cultural distinctiveness of the region, and in particular to its

unique historical situation during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

This historical criticism has acquired a bad name since the turn of the century largely because of the excesses of the early practitioners. But such excesses must warn us and guide us, not deter us from trying to perceive the relationship between the literature and the history of the North.

Perhaps typical of the errors of the nineteenth century school of historical criticism is the work of George Neilson, who believed that all of the great works of the Northern romance traditions were written by the same man: Hugh Eglinton, or Wyntoun's Huchown of Aule Realle.¹¹ That he ignores vital factors of date or dialect is only one of Neilson's weaknesses. Rather more excessive is his tendency to see in the romances of the North an allegory of the history of the fourteenth century. Thus "The Awntyrs is a scarcely veiled narrative of Anglo-Scottish political incidents of 1358-59," while Golagros belongs to the time of the English captivity of King John of France. The Morte Arthure is simply a recasting of Edward II's campaigns in which Arthur's battle against Lucius is based on the battle of Crecy, Arthur represents Lucius, and Mordred is actually the Earl of March, the paramour of Edward's mother. This kind of criticism has mercifully passed out of fashion and Neilson's ideas no longer have much authority. But, in a curious way, Neilson was perceptive. In assigning a common authorship to these works, he did perceive that they

shared a similar outlook which was parallel to Barbour's. However, what he thought was the result of a common authorship was rather the result of a common outlook in the North.

There is a considerable group of respected scholars who have maintained that the distinctiveness of much of Northern Arthurian romance is due to the region's proximity to Wales and also to its early history, since the region, especially Cumberland, remained Celtic longer than other parts of Britain.¹² This viewpoint, which might be termed the insular school, holds the opinion that the curious preservation of old motifs in Northern romance is the result of either the direct transmission of Arthurian material from neighboring Wales, or remembrances of the sixth and seventh century Northern British kingdoms.

It is true that much of Northern Arthurian literature has no continental source and that in several of the works, notably Sir Percyvelle of Gales or the Turk and Gawain, early and primitive features are preserved. It is also curious that Gawain should be the focal point of so many Northern romances when he is traditionally associated with the region. According to an eminent Celtic scholar: "the Gawain tradition, if also authentic, must originate from the narrative material of the northern British kingdoms," and that these traditions refer to "a saga hero who belonged to the mixed Gaelic and British district of Galloway."¹³

This theory goes a long way towards explaining the

distinctiveness of the Northern Gawain romances and relates it to the historical uniqueness of the North. The problem, however, is the absence of any concrete supporting material. One might skeptically inquire if fourteenth century romances reflect memories of legends of the northern Celtic kingdoms. Even one of the proponents of this approach believes that French sources for the English Loathely Lady romances are more likely than direct transmission.¹⁴ For, Loomis and others have demonstrated convincingly that the route of the Arthurian legend is from Wales to Brittany to France and only then back to England. There is little hard evidence for any insular transmission of Arthurian material from Welsh to English.

Furthermore, this theory, even if it were valid, would only partially explain the distinctiveness of Northern romance. It does not explain at all the sens of these works, their focus on problems of loyalty, or the relationship between baron and king, or the particular concept of chivalry that is expressed. Nor would it help us to understand why non-Gawain works, whose sources are well known, reflect the same outlook as do the romances celebrating the nephew of Arthur.

The answer to these problems must be found instead in the contemporary history and society of the region. The most detailed investigation along these lines has been made by J. R. Hulbert, who attempted to connect the Alliterative Revival with the baronial opposition to the throne during the fourteenth century.¹⁵ This opposition, led by Western magnates, sought to foster a school of literature more

truly English than that prevailing in London. The form that developed was alliterative verse which was not a form of political propaganda, but rather an expression of an independent, English culture. Although the social poetry, with the possible exception of Winnere and Wastoure, is not specifically baronial, romances like the Awntyrs and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are clearly baronial and "perfect for reading at great entertainment." Other romances "deal in a dignified manner with knightly actions and chivalric characters." The reason for the appearance of so much Arthurian material is that the barons had an interest in the old national legends and associated themselves with Arthur. The Mortimers, for example, held round tables.

The method of Hulbert's investigation is valid and his insights into the baronial quality of alliterative romance are sound. However, there are too many flaws in his evidence to make his hypothesis acceptable. As he himself points out, the dialect of the romances is too northern for the western regions that he associates with the revival. Also, by concentrating on alliterative verse, he fails to deal with the baronial qualities of the Northern tail-rhyme school. But the greatest weakness in his argument is his association of the beginnings of the alliterative school with baronial opposition to the throne. The fact is that the growth of the tradition during the middle of the fourteenth century coincides with a period of harmonious relations between the Crown and the nobility.¹⁶

More recently, Elizabeth Salter has attempted to link

alliterative romance with the main stream of Middle English literature. She sees the early flowering of the tradition as a sign of the "optimism, energy and strongly patriotic spirit of the period," and considers the heroic spirit of Western alliterative verse to be a product of the poets' sources, not of the Anglo-Saxon heroic traditions. She claims that the social and cultural environment of the alliterative romances was not much different from that in which Trevisa worked. Mrs. Salter further theorizes that Chaucer and the Gawain poet may have been writing for patrons of similar tastes and experiences and that "Lancastrian affiliation may override, though never ignore, differences of language, dialect and geographical setting."

Mrs. Salter's work is certainly a useful corrective to Hulbert's thesis and especially valuable is her perception that the provincial barons were by no means always hostile to the throne. Her study of the beginnings of the alliterative school makes a good deal of sense. However, concerned as she is primarily with metrical form, she does not adequately distinguish regional variations. Western and Southern alliterative poetry was indeed produced in an area that was not provincial and that resembled the ambience of Trevisa. But we have already seen what Trevisa thought of Northern culture and language. Therefore, however valid her remarks are on Western alliterative verse, they are not relevant to, and do not explain Northern alliterative and tail-rhyme romance. Furthermore, her theory of the connection between the Lancastrian house and the Gawain poet rests

on McIvor's localization of the poem on the border of Staffordshire-Cheshire, a location not accepted by all scholars.¹⁷ Finally, her claim that the "Northern clerks translated and paraphrased. . . some of the most famous French and Latin works of the age" gives too little credit, as we shall see, to the originality of the Northern romancers.

The most direct study of Northern romance has been written by Derek Pearsall, who focuses on the development of the Northern tail-rhyme tradition.¹⁸ His awareness of the sophistication of the non-alliterative poetry of the area is an important contribution to the concept of a Northern school of romance that is to be developed here. Yet, although his analysis is cogent and his discussion of the realism of Northern romance particularly valuable, he makes no attempt to discuss the reasons for this distinctiveness in his general survey of Middle English romance. Also, despite his dissatisfaction with the conventional classification of Middle English romance, he still depends too heavily on metrical criteria since he ignores the similarities between alliterative and non-alliterative works.

But one of the early twentieth century critics of Middle English literature clearly discerned the qualities of Northern romance. According to Edith Rickert, "the North country had its own fashion, as different as possible from the larger group. [of romances]"¹⁹ She notes that the poems of the North "are usually grim and martial in tone, showing appreciation of the wilder aspects of nature. . . they are usually unconventional and unexpected in narrative." Professor

Rickert also neatly contrasts the originality and poetic merit of the Northern writers with the commonplace hackwork of the non-Northern minstrels.

Both Pearsall and Rickert, although perceiving the uniqueness of Northern romance, offer no reasons for it. Recently, Dieter Mehl, who agrees that Northern romance focuses on courtesy and chivalry, has suggested that these qualities are the product of the isolation of the North "where a strictly feudal form of society survived longer than in the South and certain courtly and popular traditions were kept alive." ²⁰

Rickert's suggestions form a basis for further investigation, for neither she nor Mehl attempt to define precisely what makes up the Northern outlook. Similarly, Mehl does not attempt to relate these qualities to the specific nature of Northern feudalism. Yet just such a study was successfully made by Trounce for the East Midlands tail-rhyme romances. ²¹ In his study of the society, the audience, and the literary conventions of the East Midlands school, Trounce was able to relate the piety and popular tone of the romances to the bourgeois interests of their audience and he could thus account for the outlook of the poets of that tradition. In this study I shall borrow part of his method and attempt to define the conventions of the Northern romances and to determine how they were affected by the interests of their baronial audience.

Because of the distinctiveness of Northern history and

culture we must examine this subject without seeking to relate specific events to the specific romances, or specific historical figures to the patrons of the romance writers.²² There may be some merit to the suggestion of Hulbert, seconded by Salter, that references to estates, retinues, account books and bequests of the higher nobility should be studied in the hope of finding evidence for patronage. But we must also consider Holz knecht's observation that there is only fragmentary evidence for patronage in north and northwest Middle English literature.²³

Instead, it will be more fruitful to concentrate on the general history of the region, to define more precisely its historic uniqueness in both the cultural and political realms. To accomplish this we must examine not only the contemporary history of the area as expressed in chronicles and historical literature but also modern studies of the region. Both aspects of the investigation present some difficulties. English Medieval history has until quite recently, been dominated by the Institutionalists who focused on the origins of English institutions in the medieval past. Such a viewpoint is not conducive to regional history, a subject too often ignored by modern historians. The Victoria County Histories are invaluable records of regional history, but they are records, not studies, and offer neither Southern's insights into the ideals and attitudes of great personalities of an epoch, nor Marc Bloch's broad approach into the pattern of a whole society.²⁴

Different but even more difficult problems exist with the

contemporary sources. They too are, for the most part, records rather than studies, and behind their dry recital of events we can only dimly perceive the nature of Northern society and the ideals of its aristocracy. The historical literature, such as survives, is a far better indication of these ideals and we shall rely upon it heavily.

My main task will be to determine the distinctive structure of Northern Baronial society and to closely define the ideals of the Northern Magnates. I will not be concerned with the extent to which Northern romance illustrates the realistic aspects of its society, except as it relates to these ideals. The work of Vanvoort and Gist certainly improves our knowledge of the harsh realities of the Medieval world,²⁵ but it does not shed much light on the romances themselves. Rather, we shall attempt to discern the particular chivalric values of the Northern barons and see how these ideals are reflected, or perhaps generated, in the literature of the region.

My investigation of the literature of the North shall focus primarily on Arthurian romance, which represents by far the most numerous and best examples of Northern chivalric literature. My study will not be confined to the literature of the purely Northern dialect, for North Midlands, especially Northwest Midlands, was spoken in an area that culturally and politically belonged to the North. We are, however, faced with a more difficult problem in that our surviving romances are not all in their original dialect.²⁶ Thus, Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle has not survived in a specifically

Northern form, but from its localisms it is clearly identifiable as a Northern work. Similarly, The Weddyng of Sir Gawain is written in an East Midlands dialect, but is generally considered also to be a Northern work. The Alliterative Morte Arthure has generated a great deal of controversy about its original dialect, but scholars are generally agreed that our surviving MS. is badly corrupted.²⁷

We shall also concern ourselves with Scottish chivalric, as opposed to courtly, literature. Although there were dialect differences after 1400, the outlook of the North was not confined to the English side of the border, but was shared by both English and Scots. As we shall see, the quality of Northerness transcended national boundaries. I shall attempt to establish a corpus of Arthurian romance written in the area that shares the Northern distinctiveness and outlook.

This study will begin with a historical survey of the North, focusing on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for it was during this time that the North, as a result of the border hostilities following Scotland's war of independence, became even more isolated from the rest of Britain. Contemporary with this special historical situation is the production of Arthurian romance. For the study of this history I shall extensively use the County histories, family histories and whatever local historical studies have been made of the region.

I shall then consider those contemporary historical sources that will further our understanding of Northern society. Gray's Scalachronicon is one of the few chronicles of the region to offer much

insight. Even more valuable are the passages concerning the North in Froissart, for he is one of few medieval historians to give a picture of the society, not merely the events, of the day, and his interest in chivalry will help us to understand the knightly ideals of the region. Of immense value is Barbour's Bruce, which is both a historical document and a chivalric romance and thus provides us with a necessary link between the literature and the history of the area. We shall also examine the later work, Blind Harry's Wallace, and the two ballads dealing with the battle of Otterburn.

Before studying the Arthurian romances of the region, I shall consider the three Carolingian romances composed in the North. Although they are important in their own right, and reflect the Northern outlook, their primary function for us is to serve as a link to the literature that is most analogous in its point of view to Northern romance: the French Epic of Revolt, or the Barons' Cycle. Many critics have observed that the Chanson de Geste sentiment that is at the basis of the French Carolingian romances is also an element in Northern chivalric literature. The reappearance of such an early sensibility in romance of the late Middle Ages poses an interesting problem.

Within the Arthurian romances of the North one group in particular stands out, the romances that make Gawain their central character. These Gawain texts are distinctive to Northern romance, for, according to prevailing critical opinion, Gawain was a hero of early Arthurian literature who suffered a decline in his reputation beginning

with the Grail romances and who became progressively degenerate in later Arthurian works.²⁸ Thus, the appearance of a group of late romances that celebrate Gawain has become a puzzling question for Middle English scholars. In the course of this study of the Northern Gawain romances, I shall attempt to find the reasons for this Gawain revival in the outlook of the Northern romancers and the values of Northern society.

The other Arthurian pieces can not be so easily classified, except that three of them are adaptations of extant continental works and thus afford us the opportunity to examine the effects of the Northern frame of mind on the works of non-Northern English romancers. Sir Percyvelle of Gales is immensely valuable for its information about the beginnings of the Northern tradition, and Sir Degrevant, although only nominally an Arthurian work, is pertinent because of realistic portrayal of the provincial barons of the North.

A special concern of this study will be the presentation of Arthur and the poets' attitudes towards him. Of particular usefulness in studying the character of Arthur in Northern romance are the two works in which he is the central character, the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Many critics have seen, in the frequently hostile portraits of the King, an expression of the fears and antagonisms of the Northern magnates towards the throne.²⁹ Arthur, as the embodiment of the monarchy, does reflect the historical attitudes of the North towards the kings of both England and Scotland, but

these attitudes are by no means simple, nor is the character of Arthur monolithic. Rather, the ambivalent attitudes of the North towards the monarchy are reflected precisely in the ambivalent attitudes of the Northern poets towards the legendary British king.

In the course of this study of the Northern Arthurian romances I shall be attempting to achieve several goals. I will first define the distinctiveness of Northern romance and show how it differs both in its sens and its rhetoric from contemporary romances written in other areas of Britain. Merely to say that Northern romance is chivalric, descriptive, well-structured and realistic is to speak only in vague generalities; my concern, instead, will be to detail closely the chivalric virtues of the romances and to fit them into the general pattern of European chivalry.

Aspects of style and structure, although not our primary concern, are significant in establishing the common traditions underlying Northern chivalric literature. I shall also devote some attention to the unity of Northern romance, for this is one of its most characteristic qualities and we shall particularly look for such parallels in unifying technique that would argue for the existence of a school of poets.

Having defined the special qualities of Northern romance, I shall also investigate the extent to which these qualities are shared by the romance writers. Northern Arthurian romances were written over a period of some 130 years and part of the task will be to

determine the durability of such common conventions as we are able to discern. Also, if the theory of Northern homogeneity is to be accepted, I shall have to demonstrate that these conventions were used throughout the North. But along with the similarities in the works of the Northern romancers, I must also account for the marked originality and individuality of these poets.

My main purpose, however, is to relate these special qualities of Northern romance to the special historical situation of the North in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I shall also try to define the impact of the topography of the region and of Northern traditions that predate the feudal revival of the late Middle Ages.

The question of the nature of Gawain and the reasons for his pre-eminence at this late date can be, perhaps, answered in an investigation of the Northern ideals that Gawain comes to embody. At the same time I hope to put to rest the notion that Gawain's courtesy is, in all literatures, linked with his amorousness, or that the tradition of Gawain in the North is based on the Gawain of the chronicles. Furthermore, by studying the portrayal of the character in contemporary works, I hope to shed some light on the complex nature of the protagonist of Gawain and the Green Knight.

The understanding of the North and its literatures will be furthered by an appreciation of parallel societies and literatures. Since the North, during the period under study, retreated into an earlier form of government, it is fruitless to search for analogies in

contemporary societies. Instead, I shall look to the continent and to eras when barons wielded power comparable to the prerogatives of the Northern magnates, and to chivalric literatures that focused on the ideals of the battlefield, not of the boudoir or the cloister.

If I succeed in identifying and establishing the existence of a distinct group of Northern poets then I shall attempt to determine the history of this school. Although the remains are scanty, I shall at least be able to establish termini a quo et ad quem for the expression of the Northern romance experience. I shall also attempt to discover if there is a central period of creativity, a flowering, as it were, and, as always, try to relate this productive period to the history of the region.

Not all of the romances of the North are Arthurian or Carolingian. There are independent works like Eger and Grime,³⁰ and there are several works in the Matter of Rome, including some Alexander texts and a Troy romance. But because these latter works are more European than English in character, they are not likely to enhance our picture of the local traditions of the North of England. Besides, their literary value is not as high as the best of the Arthurian works, and they have raised no complex problems of scholarship and criticism. This study will focus instead on the characteristic romance voice of the North, which sang most forcefully of the Matter of Britain.

The literary productions of the North are by no means

confined to the genre of romance. The border of the North and Midlands was a center of drama productions. Many of the great Mystery plays were written at Wakefield in the South Riding of Yorkshire, or at Chester. In parts of the North an urbanization had set in, and guilds were powerful enough to mount elaborate stage productions. But these works are not connected with the romances and show little interest in the ideals of chivalry. Moreover, the audience was by no means baronial, and the plays of the North are not immediately distinguishable from the mystery cycles of other regions of Britain. It was the aristocracy and their retainers who were most affected by the separatist tendencies of the North, and who were the audience and the patrons of the romance poets. One may presume a considerably more cosmopolitan culture in the towns, but the influence of town life on Northern country society was much less than in other parts of England, perhaps because of the small number and low population of the cities in the area.

Similarly, the great religious writings of the North, such as those of Richard Rolle of Hampole, have no bearing on this study. As we shall see, one of the distinguishing qualities of Northern romance is its avoidance of the spiritual aspects of chivalry. This is not to say that Northern romance is lacking in piety, or that profoundly Christian themes are not expressed, but the works themselves exhibit no trace of Northern mysticism, and the only romance that deals with a Grail hero, Sir Percyvelle of Gales, is also the only romance of

Perceval that does not contain the story of Grail.

The study will also be limited to the romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are no Northern chivalric works earlier than this period, and, although there is a considerable body of regional literature after this time, it belongs to the ballad tradition rather than to the romance. A study could profitably be made of the relationships between the two outstanding narrative traditions of the North. However, such a task is far beyond the scope of this present work, although it is hoped that such insights as are produced here would prove useful in such an undertaking. I shall briefly note, how the Northern ballads reflect a different spirit from the romances and how, although they capture the distinctiveness of the Northern outlook, they fail to represent the unique historical condition of the region in the 150 years following the Anglo-Scottish wars.

This introduction can be concluded by stating as plainly and briefly as possible the central thesis. I shall endeavor to discover the effect on the Northern Arthurian romances of the historical situation in Britain, north of the Humber and south of the Tweed, brought about by the renewal of hostilities between England and Scotland. This situation was fundamentally characterized by a return to feudalism and an intensification of the age-old separatist tendencies of the area. This feudalism, combined in turn with the traditional distinctiveness of the North, accounts in large measure for the distinctive themes of Northern Arthurian romance, for its focus on chivalry and for the

pre-eminence of Gawain. I also hope to prove that the society of the North during this period resembled in many ways the society of the First Feudal period, and, because of this retrogression, its chivalric ideals resemble those of an earlier epoch. Thus the literature that embodies the ideals of the North has much in common with the literature of the first feudal age, as expressed in Chansons de Geste, and more particularly the Baron's Cycle or the Epic of Revolt.

The return of feudalism also deeply affected the art of Northern chivalric literature. The existence of a ready group of patrons in the Northern magnates, which meant the presence of an aristocratic audience, and the Northern linguistic isolation are the two primary causes for the high artistic levels and common esthetic traditions of Northern romance.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 F.N. Robinson, note to vs. 4022, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 688. All Chaucer citations from this edition.
- 2 The Parson's Prologue, ed. cit., vss. 42-43.
- 3 The Polychronicon, ii, ed. C. Babbington (London, 1869), 162-163.
- 4 Fernand Mossé, A Handbook of Middle English, trans. J.A. Walker (Baltimore, 1952), p. 403.
- 5 For Caxton's parallel text see Mosse, op. cit., p. 289. The earlier 15th century translator retained the passage, cf. pp. 162-3 the Polychronicon, op. cit.
- 6 Henry IV, part 2, ed. A.R. Humphreys (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), II, iii, 24, and note.
- 7 A.R. Humphreys, ed., Henry IV, part 1 (Cambridge, Mass. 1960), xxxviii.
- 8 Shakespeare's primary source, Holinshed, gives no details of the battle that was so celebrated by Froissart and the ballads. He reports only that "in this battell the earle Douglas. . . was slaine, the Lord Henrie Percie and his brother. . . were taken prisoners as in the Scottish Chronicles ye may read more at large." (Holinshed's Chronicles (London, 1807-08), iii, 797.
- 9 The Road to Wigan Pier, Medallion edition (New York, 1961), p. 102.
- 10 S.S. Hussey, "Langland's Reading of Alliterative Poetry," MLR, 1x (1965), 164.
- 11 Huchown of the Awle Ryale (Glasgow, 1902); see also "History in the Romance of Golagros and Gawayne," Proceedings of the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, xxxiii (1901-02), 234-249; "Huchown's Morte Arthure and the War of Brittainy," N. & Q., ix ser. x (1902), 161-165.

- 12 A. C. L. Brown, "On the Origin of Stanza-Linking in Middle English Alliterative Verse," Romantic Review, vii (1916), 271-283, "The Grail and the English Sir Perceval," MP, xvi-xxii (1919-1922); G. H. Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets (Boston, 1907); K. G. T. Webster, "Galloway and the Romances," MLN, 1v (1940), 363-366.
- 13 Rachel Bromwich, "Celtic Dynastic Themes and the Breton Lays," Etudes Celtiques, xix (1961), p. 472.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 J. R. Hulbert, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," MP, xxviii (1931), 405-422.
- 16 Elizabeth Salter, "The Alliterative Revival," MP, 1xiv (1967), 146-150, 233-237. For relations between the crown and the Western baronage see pp. 146-147.
- 17 Angus McIntosh, "A New Approach to Middle English Dialectology," ES, xliv (1963), 5. However, the most recent edition of Gawain and the Green Knight still adheres to the classical provenance of south Lancashire. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, E. V. Gordon, 2nd edition, rev., Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967), xxvi-xxvii.
- 18 "The Development of Middle English Romance," Med. St., xxvii (1965), 91-116.
- 19 Early English Romances in Verse, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), xxxiv-xxxviii.
- 20 The Middle English Romances of the 13th and 14th Centuries (New York, 1969), pp. 35, 99.
- 21 A. McI. Trounce, "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances, Medium AEvum, i (1932), 87-108, 168-182; ii (1933), 34-57, 184-198; iii (1934), 30-48.
- 22 The dangers of such an approach are well illustrated by H. L. Savage's The Gawain Poet (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1956). In spite of exhaustive and diligent scholarship, his claim to have found the Gawain poet's patron in Enguerrand de Coucy has not met with general acceptance.

- 23 Patronage in the Middle Ages, 2nd Ed. (New York, 1966), p. 239.
- 24 For a concise discussion of the modern schools of medieval history see Norman F. Cantor, Medieval History: The Life and Death of a Civilization (New York, 1963), pp. 12-15.
- 25 Margaret Adlum Gist, Love and War in the Middle English Romances (Philadelphia, 1947); Donnell Van de Voort, Love and Marriage in English Medieval Romance (Nashville, 1938).
- 26 J.R. Hulbert's warning against localizing poems too precisely, although made at a time when the study of dialects was in its infancy, should not be forgotten. See "The West Midland of the Romances," MP, xix (1922), 1-16.
- 27 S.O. Andrews, "The Dialect of Morte Arthure," RES, iv (1928), 423, places the poem in the Northwest Midlands. More recently Angus McIntosh has argued for a more southern provenance; see his "The Textual Transmission of the Alliterative Morte Arthure," English and Medieval Essays Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien (Oxford, 1962), pp. 231-240. However, the poet's familiarity with Yorkshire points towards an ultimately Northern origin. See also chapter six, footnotes 132 and 133.
- 28 See B.K. Ray, The Character of Gawain (Calcutta, 1926); also B.J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Med. St., ix (1947), 189-234.
- 29 K.H. Göller, König Arthur in der Englischen Literatur des Späten Mittelalters (Göttingen, 1963), p. 176; William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley, 1960), pp. 152-171.
- 30 The work is probably Scottish, certainly Northern; see Mabel Van Duzee, A Medieval Romance of Friendship: "Eger and Grime" (New York, 1963).

**CHAPTER TWO:
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF
NORTHERN ROMANCE**

The history of the north of England during medieval times reflects the unique situation of the area. Because of their isolation from the rest of the country, the Northern counties evolved a fiercely local outlook that led to a distinctive society differing from the rest of England in its localism, militarism, and conservatism.

This isolation was partly the result of the geography of the land north of the Humber river.¹ Much of the region is upland country and, during the Middle Ages, was infested with wasteland and fens that make it inaccessible from the south. Thus the laws, writs and armies from the capital had great difficulty in reaching the region, and the power and influence of the throne were rarely felt.

The economy of the region also brought about isolation as well as backwardness. The mineral resources that were to make the North a manufacturing center in the nineteenth century were largely untapped during the medieval period.² Consequently, the relatively poor soil and inclement weather led to a pastoral economy and hindered the growth of trade. York, considered to be the capital of the North, was nevertheless a small and undeveloped town. The manorial system, while eroding elsewhere in England remained powerful in the North, and therefore the area made a late transition from a land economy to a money economy.

Throughout the Middle Ages one of the most powerful pressures for isolation was the local political situation. Bordering on usually hostile Scotland, the North was forced to rely upon itself

for defense because of the difficulty of support from the capital.³ The nearly continual threat of Border warfare, which lasted until the battle of Flodden in 1513, meant that the major military preoccupation of the northern counties was local defense, not support of the king in foreign wars or the protection of the throne.

The pattern of isolation and separateness appears in early Anglo-Saxon times. While the South was under the influence of the Roman church, the North was the center of Irish missionary activity. Not until the Synod of Whitby in 664 did Northumbria come into the Roman camp. The first powerful Anglo-Saxon monarchy appeared in Northumbria and during this period of relative stability the first examples of Anglo-Saxon literature and law appeared. The literature and law of Wessex were partially based on those of Northumbria and through the Wessex hegemony became the common traditions of England, with the exception of the North which clung to its local, earlier, forms.⁴

The Scandinavian invasions of the ninth century put an end to Northumbrian civilization and reinforced the trend towards separateness. The Danelaw region included much of the North and was autonomous until the middle of the tenth century.⁵ It was, therefore, a center for the spreading of Scandinavian influence and was also the reason for the considerable element of Old Norse in the syntax and lexicon of Northern Middle English. Justice too was affected by the Scandinavian influx. The justice that was in force north of the Trent

was a mixture of the old Northumbrian and the Scandinavian. The Wessex system, used by the rest of the country, was never adopted in the North.

During the Wessex hegemony, the border with Scotland was in continual flux; at one time or another most of the Northern counties belonged to Scotland.⁶ It was this shifting of the border that provided the basis for many of the claims and counterclaims during the border warfare of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The movement of the border also helped to create a homogeneous society in the marches of England and Scotland.⁷ There were few cultural differences that could be traced to nationality, since the border counties never belonged to one kingdom for more than a few decades. Moreover, the language spoken on both sides of the border was identical.

The isolation of the North can be measured in part by the failure of the Domesday survey to include the four northernmost counties of Northumberland, Westmoreland, Cumberland, and Durham.⁸ Actually, Cumberland was firmly in the hand of the Scots and did not become a part of England until William Rufus' campaign in the North in 1092.⁹ Those Northern counties which did fall into the hands of William the Conqueror provided the nucleus of resistance against him. They repeatedly rebelled against William until his campaigns north of the Trent made the area a wasteland for the rest of the century. This rebellion was only the first of many which did not cease until the time of Queen Elizabeth.

Rebellion was not the only worry of the early Norman kings in their dealings with the North. In spite of Malcolm's homage to William, Scotland remained a potential enemy and the border was too far from London to be successfully defended by the King. As he did along the Welsh borders, William and his immediate successors gave large holdings of land to Barons who would be responsible for defending the border against the Scots.¹⁰ In the case of the northern marches, however, the issue was complicated by the fact that the king's writ had never run in Northumbria before the Conquest.¹¹ Durham, for example, had always been a liberty with its roots in the ancient immunity of Saint Cuthbert,¹² and William had little recourse but to set it up as a Palatinate in which the Bishop of Durham had nearly as many rights as the King did in the rest of England.

The early barons of the North had to have a great deal of determination and courage, for they faced the hostility of their own subjects as well as aggression from Scotland. The first Norman earl of Northumberland was slain in 1069 and the early Bishops of Durham were by no means secure. In time, however, the powers of the magnates grew on both sides of the border, for the border uplands of Scotland were also becoming feudal during this era, primarily under the impetus of Malcolm and David.¹³ The strength of the Northern magnates can be seen in their juridical powers. Every Scottish Baron had his own court and the right to inflict capital punishment or mutilation,¹⁴ and these powers were shared by many of his colleagues

across the border. By the end of the thirteenth century every baron in Northumberland, Cumberland, and Westmoreland had a gallows on his holdings. Further, he could return all writs save for Pleas of the Crown, while the Shire courts had no jurisdiction over the baronies.¹⁵

With the reign of Stephen, the North lapsed into feudal anarchy that was as chaotic as in any other part of the realm.

Cumberland was lost to the Scots. A Scottish invasion of the North was halted by united Northern barons at the battle of Cowton Moor.¹⁶

Henry II recovered the lost lands that Stephen had failed to keep, and he brought a measure of peace and central authority to the North.¹⁷

The vigor of the early Plantagenets did much to destroy the old liberties in the North. They made peace with Scotland and set out to regain the prerogatives ceded to the barons by their predecessors. As a result of their labors, the Palatinate of Durham was the only one of the early Norman liberties to evade royal control.

The growth of regal power was more a result of the force of personality of the early Angevins than a change in Northern temperament. The endemic rebelliousness of the region can be seen by the part it played in the Barons' War against John. The role of the Northern magnates was so great that the term "Northerner" became synonymous with that of rebel.¹⁸ The causes of the wars were in part the attempts of John to emulate his predecessors and to take over the administration of the North. Part of his scheme was to claim scutage instead of military service from the Northern Barons. The latter

protested that they had traditionally been exempt from overseas military service because of their border service and hence were not liable to pay scutage.¹⁹ In the ensuing struggle the Northern barons provided much of the military strength required to bring the King to their terms, for the ever present dangers of the border had led them to maintain large forces.

Although the Northern barons had displayed their solidarity in 1215, they took no distinctive part in the Barons' War of 1265; some joined the King, others Simon de Montfort. Some of the reasons for this change may be due to the fact that in the fifty year period between these two rebellions the North had known a rare period of tranquility. The Scottish kings of the period were strong enough to contain their own barons, while they themselves had no territorial ambitions across the border.²⁰ Therefore, the elaborate defenses and protections established by the Northern barons began to erode, and the barons themselves became more intimately involved with the problems of the kingdom as a whole. Carlisle Castle, the keystone of the defense of the Western March, fell into disrepair, special border laws were set up to govern affairs between the two nations,²¹ and the traditions of the North seemed to be fading away.

The death of Alexander left the Scottish throne vacant, and Edward I soon saw his opportunity to claim it. The details of the Scottish war of independence have little to do with Northern literature, except that in Robert Bruce and William Wallace poets found

subjects for chivalric romance. But the war itself revealed much about the essential homogeneity of the North. Bruce himself had held land on either side of the border, as had many of his barons, and he had sworn fealty to Edward.²² It was not until the onset of the conflict that the barons stopped holding lands in both England and Scotland. As a result of this separation linguistic differences between Lowlands Scots and Northern English began to appear around 1400.²³

But the wars also demonstrated the absence of local defense in the Northern counties, a condition caused by the fifty years of peace. These counties bore the brunt of the border forays of Wallace, Bruce, and James Douglas. Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Northumberland all were ravaged by the Scots. After Bannockburn, for example, Bruce could raid with impunity and caused damages in the northern counties later estimated at 25,000 pounds.²⁴ The resurgence of war between England and Scotland brought about a renewal of the problem of protecting the border. In addition to Scottish military successes, the problems of Edward II's corrupt regime meant that little aid could be expected from the King. The answer, as in the days of the Normans, was to set up powerful magnates who would be responsible for the border's defense. These methods were necessary since the truce between Scotland and England was an uneasy one at best, and for the next two hundred years, indeed, until the accession of James VI to the English throne, violence on the border was a daily occurrence, armed incursions were frequent and pitched battles were fought regularly.

The English kings chose to protect the border by setting up a system of wardens, in the east, west, and middle marches, whose job it was to maintain the defenses and, when necessary, to conduct raids in enemy territory. The wardenships fell necessarily to the two most illustrious families in the North, the Percies and the Nevilles, because they were the only ones with the necessary means and knowledge.²⁵

The wardenship, however, was a dual edged sword; it enabled a baron whose loyalty to the king was by no means above suspicion to maintain a large standing army at the king's expense. The Earls of Northumberland received as much as fifteen hundred pounds a year for the protection of the border,²⁶ but this sum did not keep them from occasionally conspiring with the Scots or against the throne itself. One of the major reasons for the support given to Henry of Lancaster by Henry Percy, second earl of Northumberland, was that Richard II had deprived him of his wardenship in favor of the Nevilles.²⁷ Popular support in the North for Hotspur's son was so great that Henry V had to restore him to his ancestral rights before he could safely commence his expedition against France.²⁸ During the reign of Henry VI, the position of Warden of the Marches was as formidable a threat to the peace of England as it was to the aggression of the Scots.²⁹ Indeed, the wardens were often the principal protagonists of the parties of Lancaster and York and provided the bulk of the military resources in the Wars of the Roses.³⁰

If the English barons posed a threat to the regal authority, the Scottish barons of the border regions often represented whatever political power remained in a nation that was in a state of near anarchy for much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³¹ That is, rather than being a potential threat to the throne, they were often more powerful than the kings themselves. Robert the Bruce was succeeded by a long line of incompetent kings whose weakness in the face of their barons' strength resembled nothing so much as that of the Capetians.

The reasons for this ascendancy of the barons were much the same as in England: the necessity of creating powerful barons to protect the border. Many land grants in the border area were granted after the War of Independence, and in accord with Scottish tradition, included almost complete sovereignty as well as military power.³² The border warfare began at the same time as the struggle between the king and the barons³³ and it was no accident that the most powerful of the barons, the Douglasses, were border lords.

Alexander had been able to extend the power of the throne and Robert continued the process, but their gains were dissipated by their successors. Robert was succeeded by his son, David, who had only courage to recommend him. He led an invasion into England, but was defeated by a vastly inferior army at Neville's Cross in 1346. He was captured and his subsequent ransom nearly bankrupted the country.³⁴ The first two Stewarts, Robert II and Robert III, were distinguished only by their inability to rule effectively. The result of

the reign of these three kings was that by the beginning of the fifteenth century the feudal system of Scotland "had reached its most complete and logical development."³⁵

After the misrule of the early Stewarts, James the First attempted to restore order and to increase the power of the throne. He was so successful that he was murdered by his nobles in 1437, leaving, as was so often the case, an infant son to rule. James II introduced the first, and only, artillery train in the kingdom and set about destroying the fortifications of his rebellious noblemen. In the course of one of his campaigns, however, he was accidentally killed by one of his own cannon and he too left an infant son to rule. James III, when he achieved his majority, also tried to dominate the barons, but he was trapped with vastly inferior forces at Sauchiburn in 1488 and was defeated and slain. His son, James IV, rather than fighting with his barons took them on a joint expedition against England that proved disastrous for both; James was slain and the Scottish nobility decimated at Flodden Field in 1513.³⁶

During much of this period, particularly during the long years that the Scottish kings were either minors, or prisoners of the English as in the case of David and James I, most of the true power in the kingdom was concentrated in the house of Douglas.³⁷ The house of Douglas was of Anglo-Norman origin and in the days before the War of Independence had land on both sides of the border. William le Hardi, one of the early magnates of the house, betrayed both England and

Scotland at different times and finally died incarcerated in the Tower of London for his treachery.

It is with James Douglas that the renown of the house begins. Robert the Bruce's closest friend and greatest warrior, his life reads like a combination of Walter Scott and chivalric romance. During the War of Independence he raided his own lands and destroyed his ancestral home when it had fallen into the hands of the English. At Bannockburn he challenged an English champion to single combat in full view of both armies and slew him. After the death of his king he vowed to take Robert's heart to Jerusalem, but was killed while fighting Moslems in Spain.

James' successors were all warriors in his image. His son William was slain at the battle of Halidon Hill. Archibald, who was the first in the family to bear the title of Earl, fought at Poitiers on the French side, but later had intrigues with England. James, the second earl, confined most of his attention to the border and led many incursions into English territory. In 1387, for example, he brought a force of some two thousand Scots over the border, not only to raid but to seek single combat with Henry "Hotspur" Percy. Douglas defeated Percy in single combat, but was later slain at the famous battle of Otterburn.

Archibald the Grim, the third earl, in spite of a lifetime of military service was one of the few in the family to die in bed. His son, Archibald, the fourth earl, is well known through his appearance

in Henry IV, Part One. He was captured at Homildoun Hill by Hotspur, but later conspired with him against King Henry. He was captured again at Shrewsbury but was ransomed. He later fought in France and was made a Duke by the French King. In the tradition of his family, he died on the battlefield, at Verneuil, in 1424. At his accession to the earldom, he held the whole of south-west Scotland and was considerably more powerful than the Scottish king.

Archibald, the fifth earl, and William, the sixth earl, more than met their match in James I. The former was regent during the King's English captivity, but was imprisoned when he returned. William was personally assassinated by James, and the Douglas holdings were confiscated. However, by the time of William, the eighth earl, all the Douglas rights had been restored and he was the most powerful man in the kingdom. He carried on feuds with his own family, with the English across the border, and with James II. The throne again met the power of the Douglas, and William, like his grandfather, was slain by the king. His brother James, the ninth and last earl, continued the struggle against the king. The family castle, the Thrieve, was besieged and taken by James, and Douglas fled across the border. He attempted to return with English help, but was captured and forced to become a monk. Although this spelled the end of the power of the Black Douglasses, their relatives, the Red Douglasses, continued virtually to rule Scotland until the middle of the sixteenth century. 38

There were many other Douglasses who added to the fame of the house. Sir William Douglas, the "Knight of Liddesdale" was called the flower of chivalry. During the middle of the fourteenth century he controlled the family's holdings. Captured at Neville's Cross, he changed his allegiance and became Edward's man. He was murdered by a cousin while hunting. Another notable member of the family was Hugh Douglas, earl of Ormond, who fought a battle against the Percies at the river Sark in 1499, in one of the feuds between the two houses.³⁹

This brief summary of the fortunes of the house of Douglas during this period demonstrates how slight their allegiances were to king and country. Although they were charged with the defense of the border, they spent most of their efforts in booty-gathering raids or in settling personal vendettas. They continually intrigued with the English and were probably more of a threat to their own monarch than were the territorial ambitions of the English kings. Thus, they demonstrate the characteristics of highly developed feudalism: personal war and vengeance rather than national interests and support of the king.

The house of Douglas is inextricably involved with the English house of Percy. For 150 years, almost without a break, the opposing wardens of the Marches on either side of the border were the heads of the families of Douglas and Percy⁴⁰ and the conflict or intrigue between them was nearly continuous.

The Percies originally came from Normandy with William and were assigned to a barony in Yorkshire.⁴¹ The ninth baron, Henry,

became the first lord and the first of the border Percies. He transferred the family seat to Northumberland, at Alnwick castle, fought in Edward I's Scottish campaigns, and was later captured at Bannockburn. His son commanded the victorious English at the battle of Neville's Cross. Henry, the first earl (1377), was a friend of John of Gaunt. He captured Berwick from the Scots, but his other military exploits were less successful. Indeed, he is somewhat overshadowed by his son, Henry Percy, more familiarly known as Hotspur.

The picture of Hotspur in Henry IV is not far from the picture we get of him in Froissart and other chroniclers, save for Shakespeare's deliberate reduction of his age. He was the image of chivalry for his generation; young knights did in fact imitate his harsh pronunciation, and the second earl of Douglas did come over the border for the special reason of meeting him in single combat. In the ensuing battle Hotspur displayed his characteristic rashness when he elected to fight Douglas with much inferior strength rather than to wait for reinforcements from his father. He made the same mistake in the Percy revolt against Henry IV and was defeated and slain at Shrewsbury. Hotspur, like the Douglasses, had spent his career alternately fighting for and against his king and in conflict with the opposing border forces or allied to them. After his death his father continued the hopeless struggle against the Lancastrians and, after he was attainted in 1405, we find the strange spectacle of a former warden of the English march taking refuge in Scotland and carrying out raids against his own lands.

In spite of the attainure, the Percies had enough power and influence in the North to compel Henry V to restore to Hotspur's son, who had been raised in Scotland, all of the traditional familial rights including the wardenship. In the case of Henry, the second earl, the considerable military power of the Percies was directed against the Scots, but with little success. He did manage to raise the siege of Roxburgh, but he lost two battles at Piperdin and the River Sark. However, the Scots were not the only enemies of the Percies. Their feud with the Nevilles had been one of the reasons for the downfall of Richard II, and this conflict lay at the bottom of the Wars of the Roses, for the two families provided much of the resources for the struggle. Aside from their traditional support of the Lancasters, Warwick's presence on the Yorkist side meant that the Percies' role was inevitable. The second earl was slain at Saint Albans. His son, the third earl, was a stout Lancastrian and was slain at Towton Field in 1461, while his younger son died in battle at Northampton.

Henry, the fourth earl, like his grandfather, was brought up in Scotland, but was driven by poverty to England where he was pardoned by Edward IV. The priorities of the family were well demonstrated when Warwick shifted his allegiance to the Lancastrians. The head of the Percy family promptly allied himself with Edward and was subsequently restored to his earldom. By remaining neutral during the battle of Bosworth Field, the earl gained the friendship of Henry VII and was rewarded with the Wardenship of the marches. He was

later murdered by his own people for supporting the King's tax policies.

Henry, the fifth earl, was the last who lived during the period under discussion. At this late time, he could still muster a sizable private army. In 1513 he took five hundred of his own men into France with Henry VIII and left fifteen hundred to fight the Scots at Flodden Field. The last of the great Northern magnates, he was also the first earl of Northumberland to die peacefully in bed.

Although the power of the Percies in England never approached that of the Douglasses in Scotland, their use of power was similar. In both families regional and familial loyalty was much more important than national and royal interests. Although both were charged with defending their country they often threatened it instead. At a time when national interests and identities were emerging they epitomized the purely local and personal interests of the conservative feudalism of the North.

The Percies and the Douglasses were by no means the only illustrious families in the North. The dukes of Lancaster retained their title as insurance against possible usurpation after they had ascended to the throne.⁴² Although they were not as indigenous to the North as other families, their power was based on their Northern associations. The dukes of York also relied on the North for support. Richard III, for example, became the warden of the East Marches when the Percies were defeated.⁴³ The Nevilles were not involved in as many notable battles as the Percies, but they were their equals in power.⁴⁴ Warwick

"the King Maker" was a Neville and was the warden of the West Marches. At the height of his power he considerably overshadowed the Percies.⁴⁵ Another well-known northern family were the D'Acres, who became powerful towards the end of the period and provided the leadership at Flodden Field at the head of the Cumberland contingent.⁴⁶

Northern history, however, is more than just a compendium of the great houses. For in addition to the better known nobles the conditions of the North allowed for further decentralization of authority and gave much power to the lower orders of nobility. In the absence of family histories this phenomenon can best be observed in the histories of the individual counties during the late Middle Ages.

The three most Northern counties, Northumberland, Cumberland, and Westmoreland all were extreme examples of this return to feudalism. The history of Northumberland is largely a history of the Percy family, but in the other two counties there was no dominating magnate and therefore there were a number of smaller barons.

Of all the Northern counties Cumberland suffered the most from the border wars.⁴⁷ During Anglo-Saxon times it alternately belonged to England and Scotland until it was secured by William Rufus in 1092. Henry I took the rule of the region into his own hand and made Carlisle Castle the keystone of English defense on the western march. In spite of these efforts, however, Stephen ceded the area to

the Scots. Henry II recovered it and took a personal interest in the county, visiting it several times. The Cumberland barons took an active part in the revolt against John, claiming that their duty was to defend the frontier and not to fight overseas. After the accession of Henry III, Cumberland shared in the generally peaceful conditions that prevailed through most of the thirteenth century. Special border laws were established and adhered to by both Scots and English and Carlisle Castle fell into disrepair.

The resumption of hostilities caused havoc in Cumberland. The raids of William Wallace and later James Douglas resulted in widespread devastation. Cumberland once more returned to the earlier conditions. During the thirteenth century almost all the houses of the region were built as homes, not as fortifications, but during the fourteenth century castle building was resumed on a large scale.⁴⁸ The barons of Cumberland once again insisted that their primary duty of protecting their own land gave them immunity from service outside the country. The defense of the county was taken out of the ineffectual hands of the sheriffs and committed to the warden of the marches, which meant, of course, a shift from royal administration to baronial. Every landlord of means took measures to protect himself and his dependents with the permission of the central government or without it. Actually, the throne preferred to let the district fall back on its own resources and it put matters of defense into local hands. All laymen who possessed land worth 100 marks or more had to reside continually

on their estates for the defense of the border. There are other examples of this return to the old conception of defense in exchange for land. The tenants of both Cumberland and Westmoreland held their land only on the condition of rendering military service when summoned by the warden of the marches. Furthermore, scutage could be used only when the king and his army marched against Scotland, not in local border actions. Drenges, another type of tenure based on money payments, was not as respected as the more feudal bonds.⁴⁹

The immediate result of these new policies was that many of the greater families of the county became conspicuous as war lords: the Tilliots of Greystokes and the D'Acres.⁵⁰ The county of Westmoreland, which had the same conditions as Cumberland was divided into two great baronies, Kendall and Appleby.⁵¹

Durham is unique among the Northern counties, and among the counties of all of England, in that it was one of the few palatinates. These palatinates, among which were numbered Chester and, for a time, Lancashire, were equivalent to the counties or duchies in France.⁵² The palatinate of Durham was not set up by William the Conqueror, as many historians used to believe, because he did not set up any palatinates. Rather, the palatinate status was inherited from Anglo-Saxon times and had its origin in the immunities given to the church and connected with the shrine of Saint Cuthbert.⁵³ The bishops of Durham ultimately assumed the rights of a monarch in their

own territory except for the power of making treaties. This restriction was necessary because a strong bishop might conspire with the Scots against the throne while a weak one might buy them off.⁵⁴

All land in the palatinate was held from the bishop, not from the king. The bishop had control of all mines, of all buried treasure, all royal fish, and all of the forests. Moreover, his possession of Durham Castle gave him an impregnable stronghold and superiority over his barons. "During the period of 1066 to 1489, the bishops of Durham desired to be as kings in their palatinate and in varying degrees they approximated this ideal."⁵⁵ Under the Plantagenets, when many of the barons were losing their rights the bishops of Durham managed to keep theirs. Edward I was able to revoke the palatinate rights, but because of the border trouble they were gradually restored during the rest of the fourteenth century. Durham's immunities were doomed only by the Tudor accession.⁵⁶

The border wars had the same effect on Durham as on the other Northern counties. The palatinate was open to attack and was ravaged several times.⁵⁷ As in the other counties, defense forces were raised by general muster and feudal tenure. Durham castle was regularly garrisoned by feudal levies rather than by the mercenaries who were so common in the rest of the country.⁵⁸ The command and the direction of these forces was usually by the local barons and this in turn led to a diminishing of the bishop's power. The growing concentration of baronial estates into the hands of a few men had presented

the bishop with overwhelmingly powerful rivals, and the balance between bishop and baron was further disturbed by the number of armed men these lords were allowed to keep for the defense of the border. By the fifteenth century, therefore, the bishop of Durham was little more than a primus inter pares.⁵⁹ This process is markedly similar to the gradual domination of the throne by the Northern magnates as a group during the middle of the fifteenth century.

When William conquered England, he realized that Yorkshire would always be a center of rebellion and tried unsuccessfully to exterminate the population.⁶⁰ His predictions were correct, and there were violent rebellions in the county as late as the sixteenth century. Although Henry II brought a measure of peace and authority to the region, the Yorkshiresmen revolted against both of his sons. They also revolted against Edward II. Gilbert Middleton, who had been a warden of the march, was actually in league with the Scots against the English. York also revolted against Edward III on the grounds that the border was not being defended properly and that the county was being ravaged. Yorkshire was, of course, the center of strength of the Yorkist party during the Wars of the Roses. Edward IV was primarily a Yorkshire baron, whose power lay in the North as did that of his brother Richard. In the sixteenth century Yorkshire took part in many rebellions, in part because of the effect of the enclosure movements on its primarily agrarian economy and in part because of its conservative adherence to Catholicism. But the

traditions for this independence and rebelliousness lay on its earlier history.

Lancaster is an example of the independence of a Northern county in that it was several times a palatinate and was often used as a base of power against the king. Lancaster, unlike other Northern counties, was controlled by the Anglo-Saxon kings; nevertheless, under the early Norman kings the area was given virtual palatinate rights.⁶¹ It was especially necessary for the area to have a strong local administration since it had close access to both the Welsh and Scottish marches. In line with the growth of the monarchy under the early Plantagenets, Lancaster was stripped of its prerogatives in 1194, and became a county.⁶² As in the rest of the North, the pressure of the renewed hostilities along the border made it necessary to create once again an independent local administration.

Edmund, the younger brother of Edward I, became the first earl of Lancaster and had nearly regal powers within his domain.⁶³ His son Thomas, the second earl, was one of the leaders of the nobles who conspired against Edward II. He helped in the assassination of Gaveston and also refused to fight at Bannockburn. Although he was supposed to defend the county against the Scots, he entered into treasonable negotiations with them and raised a large enough army to oppose the King.⁶⁴ He was finally captured and beheaded.⁶⁵

His brother Henry, the third earl, recovered the lands but not all of the rights, but Henry's son, Henry, the fourth earl, recovered

all of the family inheritance and was made a duke because of his services in France.⁶⁶ Lancaster thus became a palatinate once again in which the duke had nearly regal authority. Henry's death left the Lancashire lands in the hands of his daughter Blanche. Her death in turn put the inheritance in the hands of John of Gaunt who thus became Duke of Lancaster in 1362.⁶⁷ The palatinate rights had been revoked at the death of Henry, but John of Gaunt retrieved them in 1377 by packing Parliament in his favor. In 1391 these rights became inheritable.⁶⁸

John of Gaunt cannot be reasonably labeled a Northern magnate in the sense of the Percies or the Nevilles, since his cultural and linguistic ties were with London; nevertheless his own base of power was his Northern holdings. As an indication of the number of armed men accruing to a Northern lord, at one time John of Gaunt could put in the field an army of one thousand men at arms and three thousand archers.⁶⁹ But the palatinate system had its drawbacks too. The social conditions in Lancashire at this time bordered on anarchy, for the king's writ did not run through the area and the duke was either incapable of, or not interested in, maintaining justice.⁷⁰ But John did maintain a household that was virtually regal and he had his own council in imitation of Parliament.⁷¹

The next duke of Lancaster, Henry, became king of England. The power behind his usurpation came from the North, mostly from the Percies who had been disappointed in Richard's largess. Although

Henry became king, he did not give up his old title of Duke of Lancaster, nor did he incorporate the county into the rest of his realm. A cautious man, he was aware of the insecurity of his position and made sure to have some territory to fall back upon. Besides, he needed the military assistance as well as the revenue of the duchy.⁷² In fact, throughout the Lancastrian dynasty, the monarchs kept the title of Duke of Lancaster separate from their other holdings. But in spite of their personal power in the North, the Lancastrian kings did not always win unqualified support from their barons. The Stanleys, perhaps the leading family in Lancaster, were one of the few noble houses to pick the winning side consistently during the Wars of the Roses, even if it meant opposing their own lords. On several occasions, most notably at Bosworth Field, they managed to keep out of the battle until the victorious side became apparent.⁷³

Cheshire, being in the northwest part of the kingdom, combined the problems of other border counties with some specific ones of its own. But the Welsh border brought about a somewhat different type of society from that which was centered around the Scottish border. The region had no tradition of independence and it was much more accessible to London than the North was. Furthermore, the Welsh presented an entirely different threat from the Scots. The former had no central government and their differing customs and language made alliance with them difficult.⁷⁴ To be sure, Owen Glendower took part in the Percy rebellion, but, for the most part,

the history of the Welsh border is not as riddled with treacherous dealings as the Scottish border.

Because of the border threats, Chester was traditionally a palatinate, but lacking any single outstanding family, the county was often in a state of anarchy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Liveried retainers who could depend upon their lords for protection from the law virtually worked their will upon the populace.⁷⁵ Thus, the presence of a hostile border was not sufficient by itself to bring about a return to the older conceptions of feudalism. Instead it led to lawlessness and disorder, because there were no great magnates who could at least enforce some kind of justice, no matter how capricious it might be.

The common conception of the course of English history during the Middle Ages is that of an ever growing power of the throne and a simultaneous decline in feudal practices. Indeed, it has often been observed that feudalism never reached the heights in England that it did on the continent because of the strength of the English throne.⁷⁶ Furthermore, whatever feudalism did survive lasted only until the thirteenth century. This view may be generally correct for England as a whole, but it overlooks the vast differences between the regions and in so doing ignores the persistent survival of feudalism in the North.

Historians generally consider the power of the magnates who caused such havoc during the fifteenth century to be based on non-feudal

sources.⁷⁷ From the year 1200 scutage became an acceptable substitute for the military service that is at the core of feudalism, and in the fourteenth century the changing economic situation removed the economic underpinnings of feudalism and created a sort of "bastard" feudalism.

In this bastard feudalism the tenurial bond between vassal and lord had been superseded by personal contract between master and man. The basis of this contract was payment for service rather than a fulfillment of an obligation that had its origin in a grant of land. Thus, there was no longer such an emphasis on the keeping of faith between vassal and lord because the new contract was between unequals.⁷⁸

It is possible that bastard feudalism, which led to a great rout of liveried men who surrounded the great magnates, was one of the causes of the Wars of the Roses, and that therefore one cannot really speak of a feudal revival in England. But a point which has been ignored is that the feudalism which survived in the North and which led to the power of most of the major participants in these wars was of a substantially different nature from that of bastard feudalism. Service through land tenure survived in the North far later than in any other region of the country.⁷⁹ As we have seen, in all of the border counties, the pressures of border warfare were such that military service became a precondition for the possession of land. As in the early Middle Ages, feudalism was the only logical response to a condition where regal authority was absent, violence was prevalent, and wealth existed

mainly in the form of land.

Thus, at a comparatively late date, when feudalism was dying or already dead in much of Western Europe, the area around the border of Scotland and England remained fixed in the system of early feudalism.⁸⁰ The major families had all of the prerogatives of the barons of an earlier epoch: the right to try their own cases and administer justice; the right to maintain a standing army and to carry on private warfare; the obligation to perform military service for their land tenure, and ultimately the right to rule their own fief without restraint. The results can be seen in the society of the North. Medieval England was always tumultuous, but in place of the outlaw gangs and isolated manslaughters that are described in the Paston letters, the North alone continued the tradition of private warfare that denotes a viable feudal society.⁸¹

One must be careful in making too great claims for the feudal renaissance of northern England and southern Scotland. The North was, after all, part of England; the Northern barons were in many cases not native to the region and their powers were not always as great as they wished them to be. But the society of the region did have a distinctiveness that set it apart from the rest of the country and which still exists. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this distinctiveness expressed itself in the rebirth of feudalism that was set off by renewed border warfare and was nurtured by indigenous traditions. This feudalism, in turn, altered the conception of chivalry

and instilled more life into it than it had in other sections of Britain. This unique conception of feudalism and chivalry left its mark on the chivalric literature composed in the Northwest Midland, Northern and Scottish dialects.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Rachel R. Reid, The King's Council in the North (London, 1921), p. 3.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- 3 G. M. Trevelyan, The Middle Marches (Northumberland, 1934), p. 13.
- 4 Reid, op. cit., p. 12.
- 5 Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), pp. 22-23.
- 6 G. T. Lapsley, "The Problem of the North," American Historical Review, v (1906), 440.
- 7 Ibid., p. 443; Rachel R. Reid, "Baronage and Thegnage," E.H.R., xxxv (1920), 194.
- 8 Howard Pease, The Lord Wardens of the Marches of England and Scotland (London, 1913), p. 12.
- 9 Victoria History of the County of Cumberland, "Political History," James Wilson and R. A. Allison, p. 235.
- 10 Reid, The King's Council, pp. 8-9.
- 11 G. T. Lapsley, The County Palatinate of Durham (New York, 1900), p. 7.
- 12 Jean Scammel, "The Origin and Limitations of the Liberty of Durham," E.H.R., lxxi (1966), 452.
- 13 William Croft Dickinson, Scotland from Earliest Times, 2nd ed. (London, 1961), pp. 81-93.
- 14 Reid, "Baronage and Thegnage," p. 181.
- 15 Reid, loc. cit.

- 16 Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 242; Victoria History of the County of York, "Political History," L. F. Salzman, iii, 399.
- 17 Victoria History of York, p. 399; Victoria History of the County of Durham, "Political History," C. Bayley, ii, 144; Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 242.
- 18 J. C. Holt, The Northerners (Oxford, 1961), pp. 7-9.
- 19 Ibid., p. 216; Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 244.
- 20 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 155.
- 21 Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 248.
- 22 G. W. S. Barrow, Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland (Berkeley, 1965), pp. 32-39, 108.
- 23 H. C. Wyld, A Short History of English, 3rd ed., (London, 1927), p. 118.
- 24 Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 249.
- 25 R. L. Storey, "The Wardens of the Marches of England towards Scotland," E.H.R., 1xxii (1957), 599.
- 26 Pease, op. cit., p. 139.
- 27 Storey, op. cit., p. 603.
- 28 Gerald Brendan, A History of the House of Percy (London, 1902), p. 99.
- 29 Edward Miller, War in the North (Hull, 1960), p. 13.
- 30 C. E. Petit-Dutaillis, Georges Lefebvre, Studies and Notes Supplementary to Stubbs' "Constitutional History" (Manchester, 1930), p. 446.
- 31 I. F. Grant, Social and Economic Development of Scotland before 1603 (London, 1930), p. 186.

- 32 Reid, "Baronage and Thegnage," pp. 178-180; Grant, op. cit., p. 174.
- 33 Dickinson, Scotland from Earliest Times, pp. 253-264.
- 34 Ibid., p. 181.
- 35 Grant, op. cit., p. 200.
- 36 Dickinson, op. cit., pp. 229-230, 195 208, 219-220.
- 37 See Herbert Maxwell, A History of the House of Douglas (London, 1902), ii, 1 et seq.
- 38 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 260.
- 39 Maxwell, oc. cit., pp. 222-226.
- 40 Storey, "The Wardens of the Marches," p. 599.
- 41 Brendan, The House of Percy, pp. 1 et seq.
- 42 R. Somerville, A History of the Duchy of Lancaster (London, 1953), p. 150.
- 43 Storey, op. cit., p. 608; Reid, The King's Council, p. 71.
- 44 Reid, The King's Council, p. 21.
- 45 H. J. Swallow, De Nova Villa, The House of Neville in Sunshine and Shade (London, 1885), pp. 184-200.
- 46 Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 269.
- 47 Ibid., pp. 228-285.
- 48 C. M. Headlam, The Three Northern Counties of England (Northumberland, 1939), pp. 101-103.
- 49 Joseph Nicolson, Richard Burn, A History of Cumberland and Westmoreland (London, 1777), ii, 15-22.

- 50 Victoria History of Cumberland, p. 278.
- 51 Nicolson and Burn, op. cit., i, 11.
- 52 G. T. Lapsley, The County Palatinate of Durham, p. 1.
- 53 Jean Scammel, "The Liberty of Durham," p. 452.
- 54 Lapsley, op. cit., p. 39.
- 55 Ibid., p. 303.
- 56 Victoria History of Durham, p. 144.
- 57 Barrow, Robert Bruce, pp. 130, 479.
- 58 Victoria History of Durham, p. 151.
- 59 Scamell, op. cit., p. 471.
- 60 Victoria History of York, pp. 397-415
- 61 Victoria History of the County of Lancaster, "Political History," James Tait, iii, 397-415.
- 62 Ibid., p. 191.
- 63 Ibid., p. 196; R. Somerville, History of the Duchy of Lancaster, pp. 5-6.
- 64 In his communications with the Scots he adopted King Arthur as his code name. Barrow, Robert Bruce, p. 343.
- 65 Somerville, op. cit., p. 28.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 34-41.
- 67 Ibid., pp. 49-64.
- 68 Victoria History of Lancaster, p. 208; Somerville, op. cit., p. 64.

- 69 Somerville, loc. cit., p. 130.
- 70 Victoria History of Lancaster, p. 209.
- 71 Somerville, p. 132.
- 72 Ibid., pp. 140, 150, 167; Victoria History of Lancaster, p. 211.
- 73 Victoria History of Lancaster, pp. 213-214.
- 74 J. C. Holt, The Northerners, p. 208.
- 75 R. H. Morris, Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns (Chester, 1893), pp. 28, 59.
- 76 F. L. Ganshof, Feudalism (New York, 1961), p. 165.
- 77 K. B. McFarlane, "Bastard Feudalism," Bulletin of the London University Institute of Historical Research, xx (1943-45), 161-162.
- 78 But even in "bastard" feudalism strong traces of the earliest ideas of feudalism remain. The relationship between lord and liveried retainer "reproduced practically feature for feature the ancient mithium which the powerful man in Frankish Gaul extended over his retainer." Block, Feudal Society, p. 450.
- 79 McFarland, op. cit., p. 170.
- 80 H. M. Cam, "The Decline and Fall of English Feudalism," History, xxv (1940), 222, 232.
- 81 R. L. Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 43.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE
OF THE NORTH

The preceding picture of the social and political conditions of the North has been drawn almost entirely from modern rather than contemporary sources. Most of the chronicles of the North during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are inadequate for any study of the social and political conditions of the times. These works offer little beyond a dry recital of the major events of the day. In fact, many of the incidents of border life have probably never come to light because of the lack of historical material. Local history, as such, was not understood during this period. County histories are non-existent and, with the exception of Froissart, historians of the time are not interested in presenting the feudal and chivalric values of their society. The majority of the chroniclers had little or no reason to extol the greatness of the border magnates, and quite frequently took pains to avoid their celebration. A brief examination of these chronicles will serve to demonstrate how little they add to our knowledge of the society of the North.

The Scalachronicon of Sir Thomas Gray is probably the most valuable. Gray was an English knight who was captured in a border skirmish and wrote his history while a prisoner of the Scots.¹ He concentrates on the military history of the region during the first half of the fourteenth century, a history in which he played no small role. Throughout his chronicle, Gray mentions the chivalric actions of both English and Scots, but his primary interest is in the campaigns rather than in individual deeds. He rarely mentions the roles played by the

nobles, but instead concentrates on the doings of the monarchs. His focus is perhaps due to the fact that for the first third of the fourteenth century the situation on the border was of utmost concern to the English kings, while Scotland at this time was blessed in having one of her few effective rulers: Robert the Bruce. Consequently, the period Gray writes about was a time when the border wars were national and conducted by kings rather than local conflicts conducted by nobles.

Nevertheless, chivalric deeds are not unnoticed. At the battle of Bannockburn, the English baron Henry de Beacumont retired from the bank of a river to give his enemies room to fight.² Like an earlier leader, Byrhtnoth, he was defeated. Formal jousts apparently occurred, intriguingly at the first of the many conflicts between Percy and Douglas: "James de Douglas with the Earl of Moray had then besieged the lord Percy in Alnwick where there were great jousts of war by formal agreement."³ The scene is reminiscent of Froissart, and a similar scene appears in Golagros and Gawain. Indeed, Gray is aware of the connection between history and romance when he comments on Edward Bruce's career in Ireland: "He remained there two years and half, performing there feats of arms, inflicting great destruction both upon provender and in other ways and conquering much territory which would form a splendid romance were it all recounted."

But perhaps the most "romantic" of the episodes of the Scalachronicon concerns an English knight, William Marmion. At a

feast in Lincoln, the knight received the gift of a helmet "... with a letter from his lady-love commanding him to go to the most dangerous place in Great Britain and cause this helmet to be famous." Marmion went to Berwick, which was besieged by the Scots, and at the prompting of Thomas de Gray, the chronicler's father, sallied forth from the castle. He was wounded in battle but rescued by Sir Thomas.

The Scalachronicon unfortunately contains gaps at precisely the time that most concerns us.⁵ Gray's history of the North ends about 1350 when the power of the Northern magnates was just beginning to be felt. Thus his only reference, aside from the passage above, to the Percies, is that during the siege of Berwick Thomas de Gray was twice relieved by "the lords de Percy and de Nevill and these nobles became wise, noble and rich and were of great service on the Marches."⁶ After 1350 we have only Leland's summary to guide us and its worth can be estimated by its allocation of one line to the battle of Neville's Cross, the first demonstration of the military might of the English border barons. When Gray's chronicle does resume, it focuses exclusively on the French wars.

Much of the value of Gray's work derives from the fact that, alone among the chronicles of this time, it was written by a soldier, not by a cleric. Thus, Gray is not entirely unsympathetic to certain Scottish knights, but he remains at heart a chauvinist and the King's man. The Scots are mostly treacherous; the English without exception are heroic. Robert the Bruce is never deemed anything but a rebel

and a traitor. This sort of nationalistic pride is evidence that the North had not yet returned to feudalism, for the characteristic quality of Northern feudalism was a comparative lack of nationalism. The Percies and Douglasses conspired together nearly as often as they fought each other.

An example of the nationalism of the earlier part of the fourteenth century is the Chronicon de Lanercost. It is of monkish authorship and thus never relates chivalric actions. Gray, at least, respects some of the Scots, but the Chronicon relates only one noble deed of a Scot, a night raid by James Douglas on the tent of Edward II which was in the midst of the English army. Only a figure of the magnitude of James Douglas could overcome the reluctance of the chronicle to celebrate chivalry or the Scots.

The Scottish chroniclers, not the romance writers, offer little more than their English colleagues. Boece's chronicle is a huge compilation of earlier histories and contains only a small section on the Scotland of his day. Like other clerical writers he takes a dim view of chivalric practices and only rarely mentions them. Thus William Douglas' valor is mentioned only in connection with his death. He is taken at the battle of Shrewsbury, and killed because he was "blasonit be þe heraldis for ane of þe maist walȝeand championis in Albion."⁸ Boece does discuss in great detail the struggle between the crown and the nobility and bitterly complains that James I's nobles were more interested in the study of martial deeds than in the study of

law.⁹ Thus, because of Boece's bias towards the Crown, he has no wish to magnify the glories of the nobility.

The total picture of feudalism and chivalry in the North is revealed only in the chronicles of Froissart. Froissart had well known predilections for describing chivalric deeds; he considered them to be a significant part of history.¹⁰ But the chivalry he describes in the French and other Continental wars is of a markedly different character from that chivalry presented in his section on the Anglo-Scottish border wars.

Some of the behavior is similar. French, English and Northern warriors are praised for their treatment of prisoners, although the most outstanding examples occur in the border wars. At Otterburn, for example, Froissart dwells on the courtesy between the two sides once the fighting is over. The Scots allow their wounded prisoners to recover before presenting themselves at the Scottish court. Indeed, the relationship between captor and captive is like that between Golagros and Gawain in the romance.¹¹ "They so made there prisoners as good chere as though they had been brethren without doing to them any damage...the Englysshemen founde the Scottes right curtesse and gentyll in their delyveraunce and raansom so that they were well contente."¹²

Part of this extreme courtesy, of course, is a result of the close bonds between Scot and Englishman. Unlike the French and

English, the combatants on the border shared similar interests, were often related by blood, and were allies as well as enemies. Some scholars have pointed to certain passages in Froissart as demonstrating the emergence of nationalism, but his description of the border region reveals its feudal outlook.

While Froissart never comments on the unity of purpose between English and Scots nobility, he often relates incidents which point out the bond. For example, during the events leading up to the overthrow of Richard II, Earl Percy and Hotspur, as supporters of Bolingbroke, are banished from the kingdom. They appeal to King Robert the Steward and also to Earl Archibald Douglas who tells them "if they neede of fyve or six hundred spears, if they wer signified of the time, they should be ready to serve them."¹³

Froissart does realize that the Northern barons had a great deal of independence from their kings. He mentions that often the border warfare was conducted in spite of the Scottish and English kings' wishes. Some of the more important clashes are singled out, particularly the battle of Otterburn, of which the historian remarks that "the battle was one of the sorest and best foughten without cowardes or fain hertes."¹⁴ Froissart's description of the fight is inspiration enough for the later ballads.

Thus we are given a picture of the chivalric values of the North that is in harmony with that presented in the romances: fierce loyalty to one's lord rather than to one's king or country; courteous

treatment of a wounded or captured foe; and a concurrent absence of either courtly love or religious fervor. The only knight who wears a favor from his lady or who goes to war in her service is an English knight from the South, while in the section of the chronicles that deals with the Continental wars, the practice is commonplace. Religion plays no role in Froissart's description of the border wars. The only chronicler of the times who achieves the status of a historian presents the North as a society where courtesy and local loyalties are the primary virtues, not piety, or fitness for love. It is a society which seems closer to that of the first age of feudalism described by Bloch¹⁵ than to the courtlier conditions of France and the south of England.

Froissart, the historian with an eye for romances, occupies a middle ground between the chronicle writers and the writers of historical romance. The only true representative of the latter genre is Barbour's The Bruce. The work is a romance based on history and as a romance it exhibits many of the qualities and characteristics of other Northern romances.

Barbour's accuracy is indeed open to question, and the subject has been debated among scholars since The Bruce was first edited. The major crux has been Barbour's confusion of the two Robert Bruces.¹⁶ He fails to distinguish between Robert the Claimant, who was one of the disputants for the Scottish throne after the death of Alexander, and his grandson, Robert the King. Early researchers of The Bruce made much of this inaccuracy, and because of it the work

was for a long while considered to be unhistorical.

However, Schofield attempted to restore Barbour's authenticity and to give plausible reasons for the factual errors. He notes that "hardly a single literary judgment has been passed on in which the author's departures from fact have not been dwelt upon out of all proportion to their artistic significance."¹⁷ He points out that the only major error in the poem is the mistaken identity of the elder Bruce. This error occurs only in the first two cantos and the deeds of the Claimant are never referred to again. Furthermore, Barbour never confuses the personalities of the two. Although Schofield's contention that the confusion is merely a result of corruption in the manuscript- he claims that "ere" in line 890 should be read as "heir"-¹⁸ is not entirely convincing, he does forcefully argue that Barbour consciously combined the two Bruces for purposes of unity. Similarly, Barbour never refers to William Wallace so that the glory of his hero remains unsullied and unrivaled.

In part, because of Schofield's reassessment, later critics are now no longer doubtful of the historicity of much of Barbour's poem. A study of court documents from the time corroborates the basic matter of the poem.¹⁹ G. W. S. Barrow, in his study of Robert Bruce and the War of Independence, relies extensively on Barbour and considers him to be an accurate source for the history of the times.²⁰

Judged as a historical work, The Bruce is far superior to other histories of the region, with the exception of Froissart, in the

qualities of fairmindedness and accuracy. The occasional inaccuracies are actually trivial compared with those of Barbour's contemporaries. Moreover, The Bruce lacks the vindictive one-sidedness that mars so much of the other chronicles. While Barbour is writing a poem celebrating national liberation he is neither blind to the virtues of many of the English nor unaware of the faults of his protagonist.²¹

Aymer de Valence, a legendary figure of chivalry, is treated with admiration and respect although he is the foremost English warrior. For example, after the English victory at Methven, King Edward is overjoyed:

And for dispyt bad draw and hing
All the prisoneris thocht thai war ma.
Bot schyr Aymery did nocht sua;
To sum bath land and lyff gaiff he
To leve the Bruyssis fewte.²²

Earlier, when relating the murder of John de Comyn by Bruce while the former was taking sanctuary at the kirk at Dumfries, Barbour does not absolve his hero of wrong-doing:

He mysded thair gretly, but wer
That gave na gyrth to the awter.
Tharfor sa hard myscheiff him fell
That Ik herd nevir in Romanys tell
Off man sa hard fraynt as wes he
That eftirwar com to sic bounté.
(I, 673-678)

Thus he considers a large part of Bruce's later misfortunes and failures to be expiation for his sacrilege.

In only one aspect of historical writing can Barbour be faulted: his completeness. He mentions nothing of Wallace and he covers the

early period of the War of Independence in scarcely more than a dozen lines. The poem concludes with the death of James Douglas in Spain. The reason for this incompleteness is clear: he is not writing a chronicle but a romance.²³ Barbour himself indicates this when he begins with the characteristic minstrel's invocation: "Lordingis, quha likis for till her/ The Romanys now begynnys her. (I, 444-445)."

The difference between the medieval conception of history and romance is too complex to be adequately discussed here, but the fact that Barbour consciously limits his material to achieve his purpose points out the difference between his work and Froissart's. The latter's work, while busy with chivalric undertakings and courtly virtues, nevertheless organizes its material on a chronological and a geographical basis. Thus, for a given year we are told of the events in a particular theatre: France, England, Spain and so forth. Froissart has no single hero, nor is there a single theme. The Bruce, on the other hand, focuses not merely on the life of Robert but more precisely on his struggle to regain the throne and on the friends who help him in that struggle. Most of the seemingly extraneous incidents are thematically related to the central story; for example, Edward Bruce's campaigns in Ireland are presented as a parallel to Robert's campaigns in Scotland and England.²⁴ Those themes which Barbour emphasizes are, to a large extent, products of the same feudal values which are pre-eminent in both the history and the literature of the North.

Schofield's analysis of the corruptions in the manuscripts is perhaps too conjectural to be readily accepted, but in the course of his study he does point out one of the unifying themes of the work. As Schofield sees it, the basic theme of the poem is the struggle of Bruce and Douglas to regain their inheritances.²⁵ Both have been dispossessed by the English, and at the conclusion of the work, both have been restored to their ancestral rights. Indeed, the first time we hear of Douglas he has been deprived of his father's lands which have been taken over by the Earl of Clifford. He returns to Scotland from exile in Paris:

And thocht that he wald hame agayne
 To luk gyff he throw ony payn
 Mych wyn agayn his herytage
 And his men out of all thryllage.
 (I, 350-353)

Further concern for the needs of inheritance is seen when, just before the battle of Bannockburn, the king addresses his troops and swears that:

Giff ony deys in this bataille
 His ayr but ward releff, or taile,
 On th fyrst day sall weld
 All be he nevir sa young off eild.
 (VIII, 978-981)

Although these examples do not prove Schofield's contention that Robert is referred to as the heir of Robert the Claimant, the fact remains that Barbour does emphasize the theme of rightful inheritance either from his grandfather or from his general ancestors.

In addition to this theme of inheritance, Barbour also

presents themes of the proper virtues in his sententiae. Frequently the poet will interrupt the action to comment on a particular moral code which is either being honored or disobeyed. Thus Barbour indicates those virtues which he most prizes.

The first of these breaks is the well known encomium on freedom which begins "A, fredome is a noble thing," a call for liberty that is matched in Northern Middle English romance only by Golagros' fierce declaration of independence in Golagros and Gawain. Barbour's main contention in the section is that thralldom is a miserable state because a thrall's lord has more claims over him than his wife does and marriage "is the hardest band that ony man may tok on hand." The particular type of bondage that Barbour laments, then, is the relation between a lord and a serf. Thus he compares the plight of the Scottish lords with that of serfs. It is clear that Barbour is not advocating a new society; rather he is commenting on the difference between the lord-vassal bond and lord-serf bonds. The crime of the English is, therefore, their breaking of the feudal bond, which allows for respect between lord and vassal, and their degradation of the Scots from vassals, or even conquered enemies, to the level of serfs.

The next virtue that Barbour praises is one that is at the heart of chivalry and is ascribed to every hero in the poem: valor, or "worship." If freedom "makis a man til have liking," then "worschip is a perfytt thing/ For mayss men till haiff loving." The particular valor that Barbour admires is a valor born of wisdom and always

subject to it: "worschip extreytes has ywa. / Fulehardyment the formast is/ And the tothyt is cowartyss." We shall note later how a similar theme is found in the Alliterative Morte Arthur, where Gawain impetuously rushes into battle, the second time to his death. Perhaps one might also point to the Gawain poet's implied criticism of Arthur and Gawain for so lightly and heedlessly accepting the Green Knight's challenge.²⁶

The parallel seems closer when we consider Barbour's characterization of Edward Bruce. Robert and James Douglas are always portrayed as heroes who never lose their wits and who know when to retreat. Edward, however, is always plunging into danger and, because of his "fule haoyment" undertakes his Irish campaign with insufficient resources and is slain. Barbour makes clear the error of Edward Bruce and his men:

On this siss was thai noble men
 For wilfulness all lesyt then.
 And that wes syne and gret pite
 For had thair owtrageouss bounte
 Bene led with wyt and with mesure.
 Bot giff the mar mysgiventur
 Bene fallyn thaim it suld rycht hard thing
 Be to lede thaim till owtreyng.
 Bot gret owtrageous sorquedry
 Gert thaim all her sorschip by.

(XII, 861-869)

In addition to proper "worschip" in a soldier, Barbour comments on proper valor in a commander. He reasons that an army gains its valor from its leader and that if he is cowardly, it will be too. Barbour emphasizes that the great virture of Robert lay not only

in his own prowess but also in his ability to inspire confidence in his men. Whenever he is unable to lead his army, usually because of his illnesses, they are invariably defeated.

After valor and the ability to lead men it seems only inevitable that Barbour comment on the concomitant virtue of loyalty. As in other Northern romances, "trouthe" or "lawte" is at the center of the poem. Time and again Barbour praises the loyalty of Bruce's lieutenants. The English, on the other hand, are often guilty of treachery or of the attempted corruption of a Scot to betray his king. Robert's greatest perils always come when his subjects and vassals do not give him his rightful support, as in the case of the Comyns.

In contrast to Bruce's enemies, the figure of Douglas, who comes close to dominating the romance, is singled out as much for his loyalty as for his skill in battle. Douglas' death while fighting the Moors in Spain, when he attempts to carry out his king's last request is a virtual apotheosis of the "lawte" that he has demonstrated throughout. The final elegy upon him emphasizes those virtues which Barbour evidently admired most:

For he was swete and debonar,
 And weill couth trete hys frends far.
 And his fayis rych fellounly
 Stonay, throw hys chevalry;
 The quethir off little after wes he
 Our all thing luffit he lawte.
 At tresoun growyt he sua gretly
 That na traytour mycht be him by,
 That he mycht wyt that he ne suld be
 Weill punyst off his cruelte.

(XIV, 1101-1110)

Courtesy is as prized in The Bruce as valor and loyalty. We have already seen how Aymer de Valence is singled out among the English for his comparatively gentle treatment of Scottish prisoners. In contrast, Edward's blackest crimes are always refusal to treat his prisoners honorably. The grimmest example of this occurs just before his death. The dying king, when asked what should be done with some Scottish captives, replies: "Hyngis and drawys." Barbour comments:

That wes wondir of sic sawis;
 That he to the dede was ner
 Suld answer apon sic maner
 For owten menyng and mercy.
 (III, 550 554)

An image of the ideal knight who combines all of these virtues is drawn in Barbour's paeon to Thomas Randolph, the king's nephew and later the earl of Moray. He is "curageous, wyss, worthy and wycht," but "also of as soverne gret bounte." (VII, 572-75). In addition, he is "curtaiss at poynt and debonayr." As do the other knights in the romance, "lawte he lowyt atour all thing. . . Falset tresoun and felony he stud agayne ay encrely (VLI, 586-589)." Thus, Barbour's ideal knight is courteous, merciful, valiant and loyal.

These are the major chivalric virtues mentioned in The Bruce. However, there are two virtues of great importance in the later chivalric literature of the Continent which are not emphasized here: piety and courtly love. While Froissart's chronicles are full of knights who do battle to gain their lady's favors, only once is this

custom mentioned in The Bruce. When James Douglas captures his own castle, which had been in English hands, the warden, Sir John of Webtoun, is slain and on his body a letter from a lady is found which says that he must keep the Douglas' castle for a year to gain her love. Barbour makes no comment on the incident, but keeping in mind his technique of making a point through contrasting characters one sees a difference between Douglas' desire to regain his ancestral land and the English knight's rather frivolous reasons for defending the castle.

All of Barbour's figures are pious and the Archdeacon of Aberdeen makes sure to include a fair amount of religion. However, Bruce's attempt to regain his kingdom is never conceived of in religious terms- he is fighting no holy war and in fact is himself guilty of sacrilege. Similarly, Bruce's great victories are never attributed to Divine assistance but rather to his own secular virtues. Besides, we find no mysticism in The Bruce- no Grail Quest or Galahad figure. Religion plays no active role apart from its place in the usual duties of knight-hood. To be sure, King Robert asks the Douglas to carry his heart in the wars against the Muslims, but his reason is not entirely crusading zeal; rather, he is attempting to atone for the many murders he had committed in the Wars of Independence.

The belief that Barbour is not interested in chivalry or personal loyalties²⁷ is an oversimplified one. Certainly, there is nationalist pride in the poem. Barrow contends rightly that the War of Independence materialized the concept of "the community of the realm."²⁸ Yet

Barbour's nationalism is not so extreme as to preclude the possibility of bravery and chivalry on the English side and treachery on the Scottish side. In fact, Barbour makes no attempt to conceal the numerous wars that the Bruce waged against his own people.

Part of the reason for this balanced view, a balance emphasized by comparison with contemporary chronicles, is that as a romance writer Barbour has as one of his chief purposes the exaltation of chivalric virtues, no matter where it occurs. Of course, he is not without his biases; of course he is not without nationalism- he is after all writing a romance about recent events, not about a legendary kingdom. Yet his nationalism is a good deal less extreme than that of Southern English romances. Furthermore, to say that he is a humanitarian concerned with "fredome" and "rycht" is to apply modern definitions of these terms to an entirely different conception of Barbour's.

To say further that Barbour is more democratic and less feudal than other romance writers²⁹ is again to misunderstand medieval concepts. The Bruce is more "democratic" than non-Northern romances in that the common people often play an important role and in fact their appearance gives a distinctive flavor to the poem. But this appearance of virtue among the common people is not unusual in Northern romance as evidenced by Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle or The Taill of Rauf Coilgear.

This commoner's chivalry that appears in Northern romance is rooted in the historical reality of the times, for much of the fighting

and raiding on both sides of the border was conducted by the common people. In fact, much of the strength of the Northern barons lay in their ability to raise large armies of tough experienced fighting men at short notice. However, this democratization of war does not bespeak any lack of feudalism; rather, it demonstrates the extent to which feudalism had permeated the Northern regions. For, as we have seen, even the common people held their land from a lord in exchange for military service.³⁰ The relationship, of course, differed from that of the lord-vassal, but it still depended on the premise of loyalty and valor. Democracy and feudalism are contradictory concepts today, but in the context of border society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they were not.

The image of chivalry that is presented in The Bruce is similar to that which Froissart describes in his chronicles of the North, and resembles that of an older era, "the old feudalism." The virtues most prized are those of the Chansons de Geste, and the early continental Arthurian romances. Valor, loyalty, and courtesy predominate as well as the achievement of one's feudal rights. Piety is also respected, but not in the sense of La Queste del Saint Graal or the Perlesvaus. Courtly love involves only outsiders to the region. Barbour's work may have been written at the request of a king to glorify his line, but it is not a product of nationalism or monasticism. It remains firmly feudal in outlook.

One has only to compare The Bruce with The Wallace to

recognize the difference between a work of nationalism and one of feudalism. The Wallace, written at least a hundred years after The Bruce, is much more oriented towards chauvinism than chivalry.³¹ Also, since it was written well after the events it describes, it is worthless as a historical document. Finally, Blind Harry's work has traces of "aureate" diction and is clearly a product of the Scottish Literary Renaissance rather than of the Middle Ages.

Schofield's study of the authorship of The Wallace points out the difference between the two Scottish historical romances. Although one may not entirely accept his conclusions about the origin of The Wallace, and certainly his association of Blind Harry with such figures of mythology as Odin or Ossian or Taliessin is not convincing,³² some of his findings do shed some light on the qualities of Blind Harry's work. Schofield claims that "Blind Harry" is only a pseudonym, chosen because of its associations with the legendary past and with prophecy, much like Merlin or Thomas the Rhymer, and that the author, in spite of his protestations of being a "burel man" was neither blind nor a minstrel. Instead he was a man attached to the court, possibly a herald, who was greatly influenced by Chaucer and who was fully conversant with the literary conventions of the Scottish Renaissance.³³

Schofield believes that the author's purpose was to incite the Scots to make war on the English. He agrees with Neilson³⁴ that The Wallace was written at a time of tensions when Edward IV was plotting

with exiled Scottish nobles to overthrow the Scots king. However, the historical value of the poem is negligible since Harry's purpose was "to fan a pestilent quarrel."³⁵ Further, the rigid nationalism and the need to incite the Scots makes any chivalric attitude, such as that of The Bruce, nearly impossible.³⁶

Whether or not Blind Harry was the author of The Wallace and whether or not he was a minstrel, the poem is clearly a product of the Scots court and of the court literature. Barbour, it is true, wrote at court, but it was a court without a native literary tradition and without a strong king at war with his nobles. The court of Robert the Steward was so dominated by the nobility that any pretensions to royal prerogatives were muted. The Bruce, therefore, is not a poem dedicated to a king,³⁷ but is rather a paean to the redeemers of a nation which apports as much praise to the nobles surrounding the Bruce as to the Bruce himself. The Wallace, however, is a courtly poem written, it is true, not to glorify a monarch, but it has as part of its aims the unification of the country against the treason of some of the leading nobles, and also the inspiring of a patriotic fervor against the English.

Henry the Minstrel attempts to create a saintly national hero. William Wallace is never in the wrong, not even when he slays one of his own men on the slightest suspicion of treason. Wallace's motivations for his deeds are based not on the feudal ones of recovering one's familial inheritance, but rather on the murder of his family.

One wonders what Barbour's attitude towards Wallace would have been, since Henry tells us that while Wallace spared women and children he never took prisoners when he fought the English. In fact, Wallace's only courteous deed comes when he spares the life of a captured pirate and also wins his pardon from the French king. But this episode and others like it seem to be reminiscences from earlier romances about British heroes abroad.³⁸ For example, during one of Wallace's sojourns in France, he fights a lion, unarmed, just as Richard does in Richard Coeur de Lion.

The historical accuracy of The Bruce has been discussed above. As a corollary, Barbour is extremely precise about his geography; Bruce's travels through Scotland are well documented and make sense logistically. The Wallace, on the other hand, is characterized by the typically romance vagueness of locale. Wallace's wanderings seem improbable, particularly the extent of his border raids which take him as far south as London.³⁹

In short, The Wallace compared with The Bruce is much less of a history and much more of a romance.⁴⁰ However, it is much less of a chivalric romance. The differences between the two works are in part the result of the differences in the backgrounds of their composition.

The Bruce was written at the height of the border troubles and at a time when feudal magnates on both sides of the border had strength enough to openly challenge their kings. The style of warfare

that Barbour describes, chivalric in spite of its ferocity, was more a reflection of his own times than of the period of the Wars of Independence. Consequently his work is based on the old feudal virtues of valor, loyalty, and courtesy, with a definite bias towards a limitation of central authority. The figures of Bruce, Douglas, or Randolph would not be out of place in a Chanson de Geste, or an early Chrétien romance, but they would be relegated to a secondary position behind such later figures of romance as Lancelot, Galahad or Perceval.

The Wallace, on the other hand, is written at a time when romances are no longer being produced in Scotland, indeed when the primary mode of literary composition is Continental in taste and owes most of its traditions to Chaucer. Its late date suggests that the decline in the feudal way of life which had occurred in the non-Northern parts of England at a much earlier date had reached the border regions by the beginning of the sixteenth century. The particular admiration for courtesy as well as valor, for mercy towards one's enemy as well as loyalty to one's lord, which characterized the Northern romance writers is singularly absent from The Wallace.

Finally, a word must be said about the style of the two poems. Barbour is commonly acknowledged to be the father of Scottish verse. His poem is written in octosyllabic couplets, a style more reminiscent of Southern romance than of Northern. This difference in form demonstrates that, after all, The Bruce, is not a product of the Border, of either the "tail-rhyme" or alliterative branches. The Scots poet lacks

the rich imagery of the alliterative poets as well as their grace of language. We must remember that Barbour was a pioneer in his dialect, for alliterative poetry was a West Midlands development which made its way northward. The good Scots alliterative and tail-rhyme romances date mostly from the fifteenth century; examples are Golagros and Gawain and the Taill of Rauf Coilgear. Another distinction between Barbour and the Northern School is found in Barbour's failure to give the kind of total structure to his poem that raises works like Gawain and the Green Knight above their contemporaries. Thus, Barbour is not a product of what J. R. Hulbert has called the "baronial" school of romance writing,⁴¹ but his themes indicate the strength of the feudal tradition in the North in the fourteenth century, and a response to these traditions that is parallel to that of the Northern Arthurian romancers.

Blind Harry's style is quite different from that of the border romancers and is related in technique, although rarely in execution, to the styles of the Scottish Chaucerians. Written in Chaucerian couplets, The Wallace demonstrates little of the skill of Dunbar and Henryson. While The Bruce has been criticized for its weak structure,⁴² it is still much better knit than The Wallace which, carelessly as it were, repeats episodes, has no sense of climax and indeed has no unifying theme except hatred for the English.

So much for the Scottish historical romances. What of the English? There are no actual romances, perhaps because the conduct

of the border wars was such that the English could find no subject worthy of an extended poem. The picture is not entirely empty, however, for one of the most acclaimed of the ballads is a reminiscence of one of the most famed episodes of the border wars: the battle of Otterburn. All of our versions date from a considerably later period than the time of the border conflicts and much of the historical traditions have been distorted.

In fact, it has been suggested that our surviving poems have their origin not in the battle of Otterburn but in an inconsequential border raid.⁴³ An independent version based on Otterburn once existed but is now lost. Later, there was a retelling of the original raid which took over the characters and dramatic action from the ballad on Otterburn and which developed variants on both sides of the border. The English version was later refined and became the ballad of The Chevy Chase.

Our earliest version, not the one Addison wrote his essay on, dates only from the middle of the sixteenth century, although it still has traces of the earlier school of poetry in its frequent use of alliteration. Although Child judges that these earlier versions, usually called The Battle of Otterburn, reflect "the usual fairness of partisans,"⁴⁴ they are nevertheless considerably more fair-minded and chivalric than The Wallace. For example, before the battle begins, Hotspur is begged by a messenger from his father to refrain from engaging the Scots until reinforcements can arrive. He replies:⁴⁵

"My trowth ys plyght to yonne skottish knyght
 It nedes me not to layne
 That I schulde byd him upon thys bent
 And I have hys trowth agayne."

The English version tells of a Scottish knight "that never a fote wold flye," while the Scottish version, which is not above the suspicion of having been rewritten by Walter Scott, also praises the foe's courage. In this respect, then, both poems are worthy of the Northern romance tradition, and, although in a hazy and debased form, still recollect the earlier traditions of chivalry.

"The Hunting of the Cheviot" and "The Chevy Chase" date from the same period as "The Battle of Otterburn," but were evidently composed much later since they treat events with such freedom as to make them unrecognizable.⁴⁶ The chivalry portrayed in them is different as well. When Douglas is slain by a stray arrow while in single combat with Percy, the English lord laments:

"To have svyde thy leff I wolde haf pertyde with
 My landes for yeares thre,
 For a better man, of hart, nare of hande
 Was not in all the north conte."

All very noble, but scarcely the stuff of romance or history. Rather, in its artificial courtliness and hyperbole it is reminiscent more of what has been called "the Indian summer of English chivalry,"⁴⁷ than the matter-of-fact respect for one's enemy that characterized border warfare and border romance. The chivalric code of the North never called for the love of one's enemy that is expressed in the passage quoted above. It is beyond the focus of this study to pass judgment on

the literary qualities of the ballad, but the work does indicate a change in the literary climate of the North, for it is a piece of border literature that reflects only a trace of the older traditions.

The period covered by historical literature in the North extends from the beginnings of the feudal renaissance after Scotland's War of Independence to the middle of the sixteenth century when the character of the region had changed. The chronicles, for the most part, are weak evidence for the feudal atmosphere of the times; they are concerned either with dates or with nationalism. Gray's chronicle is at least better evidence because of his role as a military man, but much of his work on the important periods is lost. Froissart, however, writes at the full tide of the feudal revival in the North and presents an image of the functioning feudalism of the area. In Barbour, a contemporary of Froissart, we again have a reflection of the emphasis placed on feudal virtues. The Wallace and the later versions of the ballads demonstrate the death of the old traditions, for The Wallace is clearly a work of a royal court, not a baronial one, while the later ballads are already looking back to a past age and, in a sense, are romanticizing it.

In spite of their obvious limitations, the historical works do reflect the society that emerged in the North as a result of traditional Northern distinctiveness and the Anglo-Scottish border wars. They celebrate the old feudal virtues over the new, individual worth over national pride, and local loyalty over larger interests.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Herbert Maxwell, Early Chronicles Relating to Scotland (Glasgow, 1912), p. 226.
- 2 Scalachronica, tras. Herbert Maxwell, Scottish Historical Review, xii (1908), p. 459.
- 3 Ibid., p. 157.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 464-465.
- 5 Maxwell, op. cit., p. 227.
- 6 Scalachronica, Scottish Historical Review, iii, 466.
- 7 Chronicon de Lanercost, trans. Herbert Maxwell, Scottish Historical Review, vii (1910), p. 384.
- 8 Chronicle of Boece, ec. E. C. Batho and H. W. Husbands, S. T. S., o. s., xv (Edinburgh, 1941), p. 365.
- 9 Ibid., p. 389.
- 10 R. L. Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 59.
- 11 Neilson's suggestion that the scene in Golagros and Gawain might have been inspired by the Black Prince's treatment of King John after Poitiers goes too far afield in search of a historical analogue. See his "History in the Romance of Golagros and Gawane", Proceedings of the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, xxxiii (1901-02), 246.
- 12 Chronicles of England, France and Spain, trans. Lord Berners (London, 1902), v, 224.
- 13 Froissart, Chronicles of England..., vi, 349.
- 14 Ibid., v, 220.

- 15 Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), pp. 59-72.
- 16 Maxwell, Early Chronicles, p. 243.
- 17 W. H. Schofield, "The Chief Historical Error in The Bruce", PMLA, xxiv (1916), 359.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 373-375.
- 19 A. H. Douglas, The Bruce, ed. and trans. A. H. Douglas (Glasgow, 1964), p. 11.
- 20 G. W. S. Barrow, Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland (Berkeley, 1965), p. 213.
- 21 Ian. C. Walker, "Barbour, Blind Harry and Sir William Craigie", Studies in Scottish Literature, i (1963), 206.
- 22 The Bruce, ed. John Jamieson (Glasgow, 1864), II, vss. 261-265. All quotations are taken from this edition.
- 23 A. M. Kinghorn, "Romantic History and Poetry in Medieval Scotland," Dalhousie Review, xxxvii, (1957), 62.
- 24 Walker, op. cit., p. 377.
- 25 "The Chief Historical Error," p. 377.
- 26 Hans Schnyder, "Aspects of Kingship in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ES, x1 (1959), 289.
- 27 Kurt Wittig, The Scottish Tradition in Literature (Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 12-13.
- 28 See his Robert Bruce, p. 313.
- 29 Wittig, The Scottish Tradition in Literature, p. 31.
- 30 M. E. James, "The First Earl of Cumberland and the Decline of Northern Feudalism," Northern History, i (1966), 48.

- 31 Walker, op. cit., p. 203; also George Neilson, "Blind Harry's Wallace," Essays and Studies of the English Association, I (1910), 11.
- 32 W.H. Schofield, Mythical Bards and the Life of William Wallace (Cambridge, Mass., 1920), pp. 41-54.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 124-127. See also J. T. T. Brown, "The Bruce" and "The Wallace" Restudied (Bonn, 1900), pp. 177ff. He suggests that John Ramsay, the scribe of the earliest MS. was actually the author.
- 34 Neilson, "Blind Harry's Wallace," p. 111; Schofield, Mythical Bards, p. 148.
- 35 Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 167.
- 36 Ibid., p. 169; also Walker, "Barbour, Blind Harry and Sir William Craigie," p. 206.
- 37 Douglas, in the introduction to his edition of The Bruce, contends that Barbour was not commissioned by King Robert the Steward to write the work.
- 38 Walker, op. cit., p. 206.
- 39 Neilson, op. cit., pp. 88 ff.
- 40 Schofield, Mythical Bards, considers that "the poem as history, is a nightmare." P. 94.
- 41 J. R. Hulbert, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," MP, xxxviii (1931), 414.
- 42 Wittig, op. cit., p. 23.
- 43 D. S. Bland, "The Evolution of 'Chevy Chase,'" N. & Q., vii, 6.
- 44 English and Scottish Popular Ballads, (Boston, 1886), vii, 6.
- 45 Child, op. cit., vii, 13. All citations are taken from this edition.

46 Ibid., p. 16.

47 A. B. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry (Durham, N. C., 1960), p. 141.

**CHAPTER FOUR:
THE CHARLEMAGNE ROMANCES**

Of the three matters of Medieval romance, the Matter of France is probably the worst represented in Middle English literature. Even scholars who have specialized in English Charlemagne romances have not had a very high opinion of their literary worth. Smyser, for example, points out that "when the Charlemagne legends were exported they lost an essential element of patriotic appeal," and that, "to say the least, the English Charlemagne romances are undistinguished."¹ Walpole concurs in roughly similar language: "English Charlemagne romances make pretty dull reading; they have neither the heroic qualities of early French national poetry, nor genuine qualities of romance."²

If the attitudes of these specialists are so disparaging, it is little wonder that the more wide-ranging critics of Middle English romance can find little to appreciate in these works. Dorothy Everett's opinion has since been espoused by many other critics of romance. In line with W.P. Ker³ she agrees that the chansons were epics rather than romances and that they had a dramatic quality which the romances lacked. She believes that the English Charlemagne romances do bear some of the traces of their origins, but aside from these, they do not significantly differ from English romances on other subjects.⁴ The events are left but without the heroic spirit that animated the chansons. Everett writes that "the English Charlemagne romances, many of which are lost, give the impression that they were written for a popular audience, not a fashionable one, or by writers

who were driven to this somewhat uncongenial material by the insatiable demand for romances." Other critics are still more forthright in their judgment. George Kane, for example, devotes little space to the Charlemagne romances but points out that "they are much inferior to their French equivalents in their lack of any kind of inspiration and in their mechanical handling."⁵

From a literary point of view, then, it appears that the English Charlemagne romances are scarcely worth studying. However, their presence, or rather their absence, from Northern Middle English romance cannot go unexplained. For, if it is true that the society of the North had a significant impact on the literature of the region, then Carolingian romance should have been more popular than it was.

The second chapter has attempted to prove that because of the traditional separatism and traditionalism of the North, which was reinforced by the Anglo-Scottish wars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a feudal revival occurred in the area. This feudalism was similar in many ways to what Bloch noted as the first age of feudalism. Yet it was precisely the society of the first age of feudalism that developed or inspired the Chansons de Geste. We must therefore wonder why a similar society in northern Britain did not respond to these works from a parallel culture and instead turned to Arthurian romance, which was much more a product of the second age of feudalism. For there are only three examples of the Matter of France in Northern, or North-Midlands dialects: The Sege of Melayne, Duke Rowland and Sir

Otuel and Rauf Coilgear.⁶ Furthermore, Rauf is considered by many not to be a Charlemagne romance at all.

In order to fully understand the problem of the North's comparative indifference to the chansons, we must first briefly examine the growth and development of the French epic.

Since Bédier's monumental Les Légendes Epiques,⁷ scholars have generally, although in some cases reluctantly, accepted his conclusion that the Chansons de Geste are essentially products of the twelfth century, not of the post-Carolingian epoch. Bédier sees the poems as the products of twelfth century jongleurs who composed the works out of historical material furnished them by monks who wished to advertise their shrines to pilgrims and fairgoers. While this approach has been substantiated for much of Old French epic poetry, Bédier's assertion that Raoul de Cambrai has no connection with the events of the tenth century has been challenged by Ferdinand Lot.⁸

Lot agrees that the poem is basically the work of the twelfth century, and reflects the problems of that time. But he believes that the work ultimately goes back to the time of the protagonist himself and "il est né des evenements." The feudal families of the twelfth century retained memories of their ancestors of the tenth. Moreover, Lot sees the ultimate origin of the poem in "une courte complainte chantant la vaillance, l'imprudence, la fin tragique de jeune fils de Raoul Taillefer."

Some of the chansons thus present a reminiscence of the ninth

and tenth century during the decay and break-up of the Carolingian empire, the growth of feudalism and the expansion of the secular powers of the Church.⁹ Thus they represent, but by no means reproduce, the ways of the old feudalism with its concomitant emphasis on loyalty and valor rather than love or mysticism.¹⁰ The chanson is a product of an earlier sentiment than that of the Arthurian romances.¹¹

One of the three major cycles of the Matter of France is the Barons' Cycle which has also been termed the "Epic of Revolt."¹² In these works the epic degeneration of Charlemagne becomes manifest. The king "is usually depicted as oscillating somewhere between the criminal indifference of Pontius Pilate and the conscious tyranny of Herod or Nero."¹³ Opposed to the pitiful, sometimes ludicrous figure of the emperor, the rebelling baron often appears in a heroic, sympathetic, role. In such romances as Raoul de Cambrai, Gormond et Isembardo, and Le Quatre Fils Aymon the tragic action is always initiated by some tyrannous act of the monarch. In Raoul, for example, the story develops around Raoul's attempts to regain his family fief which was unjustly taken from him by the Emperor when his father died. At the end of the romance, after the death of Raoul, the feuding baronial families unite, march on Paris, burn the town and force the king, Louis the Simple, to mend his tyrannous ways.¹⁴

In addition to Raoul, many of the Epics of Revolt contain the common motif of the cheating of the rightful heir. From the point of view of the writers of the epics, depriving a son of his patrimony is

one of the greatest crimes a ruler can commit, and in fact had been expressly forbidden by Charlemagne.¹⁵ This theme is, of course, an important part of the First Feudal Age, which placed great emphasis on the rights of an heir. As we have seen in the third chapter, it is also one of the unifying themes of The Bruce.

In addition to the motifs of the villiany of rulers and the rights of inheritance, the Epic of Revolt features the theme of loyalty. Frequently, the hero is in an ambiguous situation in which he has to deal with conflicting feudal obligations. For example, in Raoul de Cambrai the protagonist's squire, Bernier, is a member of the family that Raoul has offended. He must therefore choose between the lord, towards whom he has a personal obligation and his family to which he owes primary fealty. He is only able to resolve the conflict after he has been struck by Raoul, an act which, in effect, severs the feudal bonds between the two.¹⁶ When the conflicting loyalties are between king and baron, as in Raoul or Le Quatre Fils Aymon, the inevitable result is a breakdown in the society. The conflict with the king, however, is never with the office of kingship, but with the man.¹⁷ Thus, in Raoul, although the victorious barons could easily replace Louis, they merely force him to reform.

Another characteristic feature of the chansons of the Barons' Cycle is the charity shown enemies on the battlefield. In the earlier chansons, the heathen warrior is often a cardboard figure: a favorite theme is the unequal combat between the giant heathen and the small

but doughty Christian knight, a combat which invariably ends in the heathen's defeat.¹⁸ However, in the later chansons, where the struggle is between feudal magnates rather than between religions, physical prowess becomes the outstanding virtue and in Gormond et Isebard, for example, "the respect for one's enemy almost approaches the point of reconciliation."¹⁹ Similarly, the heroes are not always victorious and morality never invades the province of the battlefield.

There is some love interest in the Epics of Revolt, but the women occupy only a small place in the action. Usually the relationship is onesided; the women are in love with the hero, but he is not in love with them.²⁰ Love is often an important factor in the conversion of pagan women, but it rarely alters the fortunes of the hero for better or worse.

To recount briefly the characteristics of the epics of the Barons' Cycle is to observe a number of parallels to the themes of the Northern Middle English romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They both demonstrate concern with the prerogatives of feudalism, a parallel we have already noted in The Bruce. Also, in the Scottish poem as well as the French epics we see a tremendous respect for the physical prowess of the enemy as well as a characteristic generosity and fair-mindedness in dealing with him. Barbour, like the jongleurs, is concerned about the possible excesses of a monarch although he holds no brief against the throne as such. The

perils of dual loyalty which are so significant in the Barons' Cycle are the same ones that ultimately destroy Gawain in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur. Finally, in both schools there is little emphasis on fighting for religion, or going on mystical quests, while love, courtly or otherwise, plays at best a secondary role.²¹

An examination of the conditions that led to the composition of the Epics of Revolt also provides some intriguing parallels to the composition of the Northern Middle English romances. Although the epics crystallize the feelings and aspirations of the first feudal period, they were written in the twelfth century at the flowering of the second feudal age. In part, they were a response to the political situation of the time.

The French kings of the first feudal era, the descendants of Charlemagne and later the Capetians, had been extremely weak and in fact offered little threat to their barons. The problems that arise with the strong monarchs in the Epics of Revolt are, rather, a reflection of the French politics of the middle of the twelfth century. The great feudal barons of France, who had enjoyed nearly absolute power, were having that power threatened by the resurgence of the throne during the reigns of Louis VI and Louis VII. The conflicts of loyalty that affect the hero of these chansons are actually those of an aristocracy in crisis, while the time of the first feudal age seemed especially attractive to the threatened barons who looked back at it as an age of baronial supremacy. Ultimately the theme of revolt was an expression

of the general feeling of discontent which was plaguing the French nobility.²²

Thus the composition of the Epic of Revolt comes about through a situation in which barons who had courts large enough to support poets, were in conflict with their king. The situation bears close resemblance to that existing in the border regions of England and Scotland 250 years later. That is, there were strong barons attempting to hold on to a feudal way of life. However, we must not overemphasize the similarities. The French barons were engaged in a losing cause, an active struggle against a powerful monarch. The barons of the North, however, were to a large extent supported by their kings, at least financially if not politically. Although they often revolted against the monarch, they were just as content to deal with him, or, as in the case of the Wars of the Roses, to claim him for one Northern family or another. On the Scottish side of the border there was a good deal more conflict between throne and nobles, but few of Scotland's strong kings lived long enough to provide much threat to the barons. To state that the North feared the growing power of the central government, and that therefore Northern romance presented kings purely as tyrants²³ is to oversimplify the situation.

Nevertheless, in spite of these qualifying remarks, the situation in the North was roughly analogous to the situation in France which led to the Epics of Revolt. Furthermore, the themes of the two literatures are also parallel. But we then must try to explain why there are so few

Carolingian romances and none that are definitely from the Barons' Cycle, in Northern literature. For the Northern romance writers did not use the politically sympathetic romances but turned instead to the less congenial Arthurian material which on the Continent had frequently become anti-baronial.

Certainly Chansons de Geste were not unknown in the North country. Barbour reports that while Robert the Bruce was crossing Loch Lomond with his followers:

The king the quhilis meryly
 Red to thaim that war him by
 Romanys of worthy Ferambrace
 That worthily our cummyn was
 Throw the rych doughty Olywer.²⁴

The reference is to Fierabras, the most popular and perhaps the most widely known of the Charlemagne romances, and one which exists in two versions in Middle English, neither of them Northern.²⁵ In fact, Fierabras might have influenced the Alliterative Morte Arthure.²⁶ But, even if the story by Barbour is true, the King would almost certainly have been reading the work in Anglo-Norman, not in Northern Middle English,²⁷ and the Matter of France was widely read in Angevin Britain.²⁸

The three extant Charlemagne romances in Northern, Scottish or North-Midlands dialects are:²⁹ The Sege of Melayne, Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel, and The Taill of Rauf Coilgear, which survives only in a printed edition of 1572, but which was written around the middle of the fifteenth century.³⁰ Of these three, The Sege of Melayne and Duke

Rowland and Sir Otuel are often grouped together because not only are they from the same manuscript, but they are also written in the same form: thirteen line tail-rhyme stanzas. However, there is no narrative connection between the two. The Sege is perhaps an introduction to Duke Rowland, but whereas Duke Rowland comes from a well-known French source, no one as yet has found a source for The Sege.³¹

Critical opinion about The Sege has varied widely. Kane includes it in his disparagement of English Charlemagne romances, but Smyser suggests that its author was "no mean versifier."³² Furthermore, Trounce believes that the poem is "perhaps the best achievement of tail-rhyme style," and that it "contains in the figure of Archbishop Turpin the finest piece of characterization in Middle English literature, with the exception of Chaucer's best and possibly Gawain in Gawain and the Green Knight."³³ In fact, Trounce considers the poem to "catch the heroic tone with more vigor if less charm than the Chanson de Roland itself." But Trounce's praise must not be separated from the purpose of his study: the glorification of the tail-rhyme romances. Only Derek Pearsall of the recent critics has yet seconded his acclaim.³⁴

The plot of the romance is certainly not as complex or unified as that of many Northern romances. The work chronicles the attempts of the French to recapture Milan from the Saracens. Their first venture fails and Roland's army is destroyed. The second and more successful campaign is dominated by the figure of Bishop Turpin who is

the most effective of the French fighters. The poem breaks off with Turpin wounded twice but vowing to go without food until Milan is won.

The part of the romance most worthy of note is the character of Charlemagne and his conflict with Turpin. Here he is the typical roi-fainéant, weak, overly cautious, and easily swayed by the evil counsels of Ganelon. The King must always be prodded into action by Turpin and at one point, when he refuses to go to the aid of Roland, is roundly cursed by the Archbishop. Since the romance does not have a parallel in the pseudo-Turpin chronicle,³⁵ we might speculate that the original source of the romance might have been influenced by the Barons' cycle.

The conflict between Turpin and the King certainly is reminiscent of the Epic of Revolt. When Turpin is thwarted by Charles, he does not hesitate to curse him:

And here I curse þe, þou kyng,
 Be cause þou lyffes in Eresye
 Þou ne dare noghte fyght one goddes Enemy.

 Nowe are þou werre þan any Saragene
 Godes awenn wedirwyne
 Of sorowe now may þou synge.

(Vss. 687-696)

Afterwards, Turpin threatens to sack Paris and burn it to the ground unless Charles abandons Ganelon's evil counsels. He proceeds to prepare his army, and Charles, terrified of the ecclesiastical host, submits to the angry bishop.

In addition to Turpin's skills as a counsellor, he is the chief

military hero of the French. In the fighting around Milan, the douze peers play only a small role and Charles is singled out for praise in just one brief encounter. Rather, it is Turpin who continually leads the French into battle, rallies them, criticizes Charlemagne's tactics and beats down the best of the Saracens.

The romance is unique, then, in that it is essentially a paean to a fighting clergyman. No other Northern romance features a fighting bishop; in fact few if any of the Middle English chivalric romances have a priest as their hero. Although military clergy are by no means unusual in a chanson, we must wonder why a bishop is so highly praised in a romance which, unlike other Middle English Charlemagne romances, e. g. Roland and Vernagu, is not based on the Ecclesiastical Cycle of chansons.³⁶

To answer this question we must first consider the matter of the poem's provenance. This is complicated by the fact that the work was originally composed in a northerly dialect, but that our manuscript was written by a South-west Midlands scribe. It is, therefore, impossible to locate the poem more precisely than in the north-east section of the country, either in the North, or the extreme North Midlands.³⁷ But within this section, at the time of the romance's composition, ecclesiastics had broad secular powers that were unmatched anywhere else in Britain.

The county palatinate of Durham has already been discussed in chapter two. It was originally a great immunity of the bishop of Durham,

and William the Conqueror had raised it to the level of a county palatinate. In spite of various changes, its status was such that almost all the rights that the king enjoyed in the rest of the country were enjoyed by the Bishop in his palatinate. That is, barons held land from him, not the king; he also had absolute jurisdiction over the law as well as the main responsibility in the defence against the Scots. The bishops relations with the king are open to question. One scholar considers that the Prince Bishop was basically powerless because he was appointed by the king and could not have any legal heirs. Hence, the palatinate was never more than a temporary annoyance to the crown.³⁸ However, Scammel points out that a weak bishop was no help against the Scots while a strong one might conspire with them.

It would be rash to argue that the Sege of Melayne was written in praise of a Prince Bishop of Durham. For the most part, the bishops were of contemplative leanings and were scarcely the sort to feel flattered by comparisons with martial figures like Bishop Turpin. But there was a climate in the area of ecclesiastical opposition to the king, not on religious or moral grounds, like Thomas a Becket's, but on political grounds. The conflict between Turpin and Charlemagne in the poem is perhaps a reflection of the conflicts of the poet's own time. Certainly his audience must have been aware of them.

Although the bishops of Durham were primarily peaceful men, the romance was composed at a time when there was a remembrance of a battle in the region which was fought with the aid of clerics. In

1346, while Edward III was fighting in France, David of Scotland led his army across the border on a plundering expedition. He was met at Neville's Cross in Durham by an army which he contemptuously dubbed "an army of women and priests." Indeed, there were priests present, not only the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Lincoln, but also many holy men who took part in the fighting and defeated and captured the king of Scotland.³⁹

To claim that *The Sege of Melayne* is necessarily a remembrance of the battle of Neville's Cross would be to follow the excesses of the Neilson school of historical criticism. But the fact remains that the English romance which most exalts a military cleric on the battlefield and in political conflict with his king does come from an era which had a tradition of martial clerics and independent bishops and princes.

Besides its relationship to the politics and history of the North, *The Sege of Melayne* reflects its Northern origins in its relationship to other tail-rhyme romances. Trounce, in his study of tail-rhyme romances as a genre, concluded that they were primarily of East Anglian origin and that they reflected the non-aristocratic aspects of that society.⁴⁰ They are popular in taste and exhibit little of the spirit of chivalry. However, he carefully distinguishes the two Northern Charlemagne romances from the East Midlands tail-rhyme works. He believes that *The Sege of Melayne* and *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel* exhibit a style that contrasts sharply with the romances of the

Auchinleck manuscript and demonstrate a much deeper sense of chivalry and heroism. Thus, the most northerly poems of the tail-rhyme group reflect precisely those characteristics of Northern romance which stem from the feudal revival in the North: local concerns, a concentration on the confrontation between crown and nobility and emphasis on chivalric action. It is particularly significant that these two romances are distinguished from the other romances in the tail-rhyme school by their location. In this instance we see that the provenance of a work has more to do with its themes and characteristics than does its school or form of composition.

Some scholars believe Roland and Otuel to be the product of the author of The Sege of Melayne, but Trounce believes that the work was written in imitation of The Sege and that it substitutes humor for chivalry.⁴¹ Certainly the romance differs from The Sege in that it has a recognized French source: the Otuel Cycle of chansons. Since Walpole's work on one of the versions of Otuel and Roland, no one has examined at any length the relationship between the four versions of the story in Middle English. Walpole's conclusion was that the southern versions of the story came from the Ecclesiastical Cycle rather than from the Otuel Cycle itself.⁴²

The northern version, on the other hand, does seem to come from the Otuel Cycle. Smyser points out that the best part of Duke Rowland is the arming of Otuel, just as it is in the original romance. He also considers the northern version to be the best of the English

redactions, a judgment seconded by Pearsall.⁴³ Certainly its theme, the conversion and subsequent alliance of an originally hostile knight, is one that is common in Northern romance; examples are The Awntyrs of Arthur and The Avowyng of Arthur. It is true that this motif is something of a commonplace in romance, but nevertheless it must have appealed to the Northern poets.

The romance in fact has little that is specifically Northern about it; it follows its source quite closely. Duke Rowland does follow the chanson source rather than the ecclesiastical version, which might indicate characteristic Northern appreciation of romance, and it is the most vigorous of what has been termed "an anemic cycle."⁴⁴ However, the most interesting characteristic of the work is its relationship to the last and most important of the Northern Charlemagne romances: The Taill of Rauf Coilgear, for the conversion scene is remarkably similar in both.⁴⁵

Rauf, unlike other Charlemagne romances in Middle English, has been universally acclaimed. However, once having praised it, critics are also quick to point out that Rauf is not really a Charlemagne romance.⁴⁶ Of course the story does have a Carolingian setting. Rauf, the poem's hero, is a poor collier who is knighted by Charlemagne after the latter has spent a night at his house. Anxious to win his spurs, Rauf engages in single combat with a Saracen knight who converts to Christianity, and the romance ends with Rauf being made a peer of France.

But although the characters of the poem are Carolingian, Roland, Charlemagne, Oliver and others, and one of the two incidents in the romance is a chanson commonplace, the conversion of a heathen knight, the romance as a whole is Scottish in flavor and decidedly un-Carolingian.⁴⁷ For example, Charlemagne and the peers ride out hunting, but soon a storm comes up over the moors and the hunting party is scattered. Thus, the terrain surrounding Paris is hilly, foggy, and stormy!

But even more than the terrain and the weather, the stock characters of Carolingian romance, Charlemagne and Roland differ considerably from their prototypes in the chansons. Charlemagne is neither the austere monarch upholding Christendom as he is in the early chansons, nor is he the weak-willed tyrant of the Barons' Cycle.⁴⁸ Instead, he is a bluff, good-humored king who cheerfully accepts Rauf's orders, and even his blows, and pays him back with a trick of his own.

Roland is particularly transformed. Although one must be hesitant to assign a fixed character to a figure who strides through five hundred years of European literature- compare, for example, the Roland of the Chanson de Roland to Ariosto's Orlando- his character is virtually the opposite of what it is in the French epic. From Roland's first appearance in epic literature he is invariably associated with demesure, with a readiness to resort to hot temper and swords that ultimately proves the cause of his downfall.⁴⁹ Roland is also a paragon of valor, loyalty and pride, but he is never distinguished by his courtesy.

Yet, in Rauf, this last virtue is most severely tested. In Roland's first meeting with the collier he is provoked time and again by the pugnacious Rauf, but he responds only with amused forbearance. Even when Rauf challenges him to fight he demurs and attempts to conciliate him:

"It is lyke," said schir Roland, and lightly he leuch
 "That sec ane stubill husband man wald stryke stoutly
 Thar is mony toun man, to tuggil is full teuch
 Thocht hair brandis be blak and unburely.
 Oft fir foullis are fundin faynt and als freuch,
 I defend we fecht or fell in that foly.
 Lat se how we may dissever with sovernes aneuch
 And catche crabitnes away, be Christ counsall I."
 (ii, vss. 521-528)

Finally, at the end of the work, Roland separates Rauf and Magog, the Saracen whom Rauf is fighting, and through his overtures he wins the pagan knight to Christianity.

As far as we know, the romance is an original composition. The story of a king in disguise being badly treated by an unsuspecting commoner is of course an old one and goes back at least to the legends of Haroun Al Rashid; the most famous version in English is the tale of Alfred the Great and the cakes. The closest analogue to Rauf is the ballad of "John the Reeve,"⁵⁰ but the differences between the two demonstrate some of the qualities of Northern romance. In the ballad, the courtesy taught to the guest is of a much simpler nature. Edward II is taught by the reeve not to whisper at the table and not to refuse admittance to strangers. Charles, on the other hand, is taught to respect absolutely the commands of his host, even when they seem to go

contrary to gentler customs. Charlemagne's attempts to defer politely to his host are rewarded with blows. This focus on the laws of hospitality is a common theme in Northern romance, especially in the Gawain poems: Gawain and the Green Knight and Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle. Indeed, the similarity of theme is so striking that Kittredge felt that he had to demonstrate that Rauf was not an analogue of Gawain and the Green Knight.⁵¹

In this similarity of motif, then, we can discern some connections between Rauf and the Northern Arthurian romances. A further connection is the obvious debt that the second half of the poem owes to Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel; the scenes of single combat show obvious borrowings. But there are still some problems in determining its precise relationship to the chansons on the one hand and to Northern romance on the other.

To be sure, there are some "baronial" elements in its theme. Rauf extols the feudal value of submission to one's host, yet this submission is couched in anti-aristocratic tones, unlike Gawain and the Green Knight. It is true that there is a similar attitude in Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, in which Gawain is taught "carl's courtesy," but the Carl turns out to be a supernatural being, not an honest working man like Rauf. The tone of the poem also differs markedly from the Gawain romances; it is something of a parody of romance.

We thus must determine why a poet who is obviously part of the Northern tradition turned to a chanson and yet borrowed only the

names while transforming the characters and the setting. And, if the romance is a parody, is it a parody of French romance? There is little in the work that is actually derived from the chansons. Besides, since the Charlemagne romances were not popular in the North, why did the poet want to satirize them?

Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found in the curious scene of the encounter between Roland and Rauf. The former's uncharacteristic courtesy has already been noted, but there is more to the matter. Just as Rauf's insistence upon the supremacy of the host is a characteristic motif in Northern romance, so is this meeting between a stranger and a chief knight of the king a common incident in Northern Arthurian romance.

This meeting usually takes the form of an encounter between one of Arthur's knights and a surly and pugnacious stranger who is ultimately mollified, or even made an ally of the court, by Arthur's knight. This agent of courtesy is in almost every instance Gawain. Thus, in Golagros and Gawain, Spinagros, a rebellious baron who had humiliated Sir Kay, is so won over by Gawain's courtesy that he joins Arthur's campaign and gives him provisions, men and advice. Later, Gawain's courtesy on the battlefield gains the voluntary submission of Golagros to Arthur and puts an end to a costly war.⁵² In The Awntyrs of Arthur he pleads the case of a knight who has been disinherited and gains another ally for his king. Similarly, in the Avowyngge of Arthur his courtesy towards a defeated opponent is in marked contrast to Kay's

demesure. Sir Percyvelle of Gales and Ywain and Gawain also emphasize Gawain's courtesy in dealing with strange knights: Perceval and Ywain, in disguise.

The author of Rauf Coilgear is not the first to draw a parallel between Roland and Gawain; the two occupy analogous positions as nephews of a king. But what he seems to do is to transpose Gawain's character onto Roland's; certainly, the latter acts much more like the typical Northern conception of Gawain than the hot-tempered warrior of the Chanson de geste tradition.

Rauf Coilgear, then, seems in fact to be a typical Northern romance. It has a sort of Gawain figure in it; the setting is specifically Northern and local, and the plot revolves around traditional feudal values. But we are still perplexed by the poet's use of a cycle that was not popular in the North, and his use of this cycle for little more than the names. If he ended up writing a romance that is so parallel to Northern Arthurian romance, why did he resort to a Carolingian setting?

The reason for this choice perhaps can be found in the tone of the work. We can not be sure whether the romance is a parody, a satire, or a burlesque.⁵³ But critics agree that it is a broadly humorous piece in which the common man bests the aristocrat. Some scholars see this ennobling of the common man as another demonstration of the democratic beliefs inherent in Scotland and in Scottish values.⁵⁴ However, one could just as easily point out that the triumph

of the commoner is as much a part of the parody as the parody is a part of the attack on the pretensions of the aristocrat.

Whatever the cause, the poem does stand at a distance from the conventional romances of the North. Its burlesquing tone comes primarily from a reversal of the common situations and motifs of romance: the collier teaching courtesy to the king; the collier successfully defying a knight; the conversion of a pagan through reason rather than through faith or conquest. Yet, at the time the romance was written, chivalric romances were immensely popular among the class most attuned to literature. A work that deliberately parodied Arthurian romance, or one that held such admired figures as Gawain up to ridicule, would perhaps not meet with much success. The only English romance which actually does parody Gawain is The Jeaste of Sir Gawain,⁵⁵ and this work was written late in the fifteenth century in the south of England when romances were no longer written or appreciated.

The author of Rauf was most likely frustrated in parodying the local cycle of romance- it was simply too popular. Instead, he borrowed the names and some of the plot from the Matter of France, but rather than writing a Charlemagne romance, he wrote a comic version of a typical Northern romance. It would indeed be rash to state precisely that he was making fun of Gawain while disguising him as Roland, but this explanation does account for the curious relationship between Rauf Coilgear and Arthurian and Charlemagne romances.

Certainly, the most pervasive element in the romance is the outlook of the Northern Arthurian romances.

The use of Arthurian motifs in Rauf helps to solve the central problem of the unpopularity of Charlemagne romances in the North. In spite of their similar themes, they had to compete with the entrenched popularity of Arthurian romance. It has long been realized that some of the popularity of Arthurian romance can be traced to the political ambitions of the Angevins. Just as France had its glorious heroes of an earlier age, so must Britain, and Arthur became the national hero.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as M. Dominica Legge points out, even in Anglo-Norman the most popular romances were those dealing with local heroes or familial ancestors.⁵⁷

Arthur was a hero of England, and, as we shall see, had Northern associations. The fact that the Northern barons often struggled against the throne did not make them any less English. Furthermore, the pronounced Scottish hostility towards Arthur was a creation of the later nationalism that arose in Scotland, a nationalism which, as we have discussed earlier, did not flourish at the time of Barbour. It is an oversimplification to say that hostility toward England led to hostility toward Arthur or to Arthurian literature. Northern romance represents a society with a distinct culture which was sometimes, but not always, in political opposition to the throne, and which had an ambivalent, rather than openly hostile attitude towards the crown.

Nevertheless, the Northern barons' conflicts with their king do parallel the conflicts of the French barons with their monarchs. Although the Epics of Revolt never flourished in the North because of the pre-eminence of the Arthurian cycle, the analogous historical situation did produce works that were roughly parallel in spirit and in the values they extol. But these works are almost exclusively Arthurian, in part because of Arthur's association with England, but also in part because of the traditions linking him with the North.⁵⁸

In those Northern romances which are related to the chansons we see the effect of the Northern school. The character of Turpin and his conflict with the emperor perhaps recall local history. Even such poor material as Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel has at least some characteristic Northern vigor. Rauf Coilgear, the best of the three, owes much of its vitality to the motifs of Northern Middle English chivalric romance.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 H. M. Smyser, "The Charlemagne Romances," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, 1967), p. 80.
- 2 R. N. Walpole, "Charlemagne and Roland, a Study of the Source of Two Middle English Metrical Romances: Roland and Vernagu and Otuel and Roland," Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Modern Philology, xxi (1944), no. 6, 385.
- 3 W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (Oxford, 1904), pp. 292-293.
- 4 Dorothy Everett, "A Characterization of English Medieval Romances," Essays and Studies of the English Association, xv (1929), 119.
- 5 George Kane, Middle English Literature (London, 1951), p. 16.
- 6 Smyser, "The Charlemagne Romances," pp. 93, 94, 96.
- 7 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Paris, 1926-29).
- 8 For Bédier, see edition cited, ii, 338-471; Ferdinand Lot, Etudes sur les Légendes Épiques Françaises (Paris, 1957), 22-72.
- 9 Jessie Crosland, The Old French Epic (Oxford, 1951), p. 231.
- 10 C. B. Funderberg, Feudal France in the French Epic (Princeton, 1919), attempts to draw a picture of early feudalism from the Barons' Cycle, but his efforts are marred by his insistence that the chansons we possess are substantially the product of the tenth century. See pp. 103-104 for his comment on the date of Raoul.
- 11 Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon, (Chicago, 1961), pp. 92-102. For Bloch, the fact that the chansons reflect pilgrimage sites and fairs and refer to material found in monkish chronicles is only coincidental to their composition. While these epics are not necessarily the direct descendants of tenth century compositions, they do reflect traditions that considerably antedate the MSS. For the difference in sentiment see R. W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (London, 1953), "From Epic to Romance," pp. 241-247.

- 12 William C. Calin, The Old French Epic of Revolt (Paris, 1962), p. 11.
- 13 Ibid., p. 118.
- 14 Raoul de Cambrai, ed. P. Meyer and A. Longon (Paris, 1882), vss. 5450-5545.
- 15 Calin, op. cit., p. 61.
- 16 Vss. 1613-1810. For Lot, the center of interest in the poem is "celui qui déchire l'ame de Bernier... pris d'un cote entre le devoir d'obeissance absolue a son seigneur et de l'autre le sentiment filial et l'honneur outrage," op. cit., p. 23.
- 17 Calin, op. cit., p. 141.
- 18 Crosland, The Old French Epic, p. 235.
- 19 Calin, op. cit., p. 101
- 20 A. Robert Harden, "The Element of Love in the Chansons de Geste," Annuaire Mediavale, v (1963), p. 77.
- 21 For a discussion of the chivalric code that arose out of the exigencies of feudal life see Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Baltimore, 1940), "Feudal Chivalry," pp. 28-46.
- 22 For a discussion of the political and social background of the Epic of Revolt see Calin, op. cit., pp. 125-137.
- 23 William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley, 1960), p. 166. See also chapter six of this study.
- 24 The Bruce, ed. J. Jamieson (Glasgow, 1869), ii, 830-834.
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- 29 The Sege of Melayne and Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel ed. S. J. Herrtage, EETSES, xxxv (London, 1880); The Tail of Rauf Coilgear, ed. S. J. Herrtage, EETSES, xxxix (London, 1882). All citations from these editions.
- 30 H. M. Smyser, "The Tail of Rauf Coilgear and its Sources," Harvard U. Studies in Philology and Literature, xiv (1932), 135-137.
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- 34 Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," Med. Stud., xxvii (1965), 115.
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- 38 Timothy Eden, Durham (London, 1952), i, 66. See also the second chapter of this study.
- 39 Ibid., i, 116.
- 40 "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances," MAE, ii (1933), 102, 108. For his discussion of the Northern tail-rhyme works see MAE, iii (1934), pp. 40-45.
- 41 MAE, iii (1934), p. 47.
- 42 Walpole, "Charlemagne and Roland," p. 433.

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- 44 Walpole, op. cit., p. 430.
- 45 Smyser, "The Taill of Rauf Coilgear and its Sources," p. 148.
- 46 Ibid., pp. 149-150; F. J. Amours, ed. The Taill of Rauf Coilgear, S.T.S., xxvii (Edinburgh, 1896), p. xi.
- 47 Amours, loc. cit.; Smyser, p. 147; T.F. Henderson, Scottish Vernacular Literature, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, 1910), p. 79.
- 48 Smyser, "Rauf Coilgear," p. 147; "The Charlemagne Legends," p. 96.
- 49 Crosland, The Old French Epic, p. 90.
- 50 Smyser, "Rauf Coilgear," pp. 138-141.
- 51 G. L. Kittredge, A Study of "Gawain and the Green Knight" (Gloucester, Mass., 1921), p. 102.
- 52 In fact the similarity between parts of Golagros and Gawain and Rauf is such that Amours, p. xxxvi, believes that they have a common author, but Smyser, "Rauf," p. 137, points out that the alliterative technique is markedly dissimilar.
- 53 Smyser, "Rauf Coilgear," pp. 149-150; Walpole, "Charlemagne and Roland," p. 391; Herrtage, edition of Rauf, p. vii.
- 54 William H. Browne, ed. The Taill of Rauf Coilgear (Baltimore, 1903), pp. 33-34.
- 55 R. W. Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R. S. Loomis, (Oxford, 1959), p. 500.
- 56 G. H. Gerould, "King Arthur and Politics," Speculum, ii (1927), 33-51.
- 57 The reasons for this preference for familial romance was the Norman longing for roots in the new land, Anglo-Norman

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CHAPTER FIVE:
THE GAWAIN ROMANCES

From the investigation of the historical and Charlemagne literature in the preceding chapters we can reasonably conclude that the North was as distinctive in its literature as it was in its history. The Northern Charlemagne romances, for example, are distinguished from the non-Northern works by their involvement with the ideals of chivalry and feudalism. However, the bulk of Northern romance concerns itself not with history or with the Matter of France, but with the Arthurian legend.

These romances are scarcely a homogenous group. They range from the near doggerel of The Turk and Gawain to popular romance, like Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and to the sublimity of Gawain and the Green Knight and the Alliterative Morte Arthure. However, within the wide variety of tone, theme, and subject in this corpus, a group of romances stands apart because of their single hero: Gawain. For part of the uniqueness of the Northern romance tradition is the pre-eminence of one of the earlier figures of Arthurian literature at a comparatively late date. But to understand the Gawain romances as they appear in the North, we must, as we did with the Charlemagne romances, understand their continental sources first.

Gawain was one of the earliest figures to be associated with Arthur. In early Welsh romance his prototype is probably Gwri Gwallt Avyn, a figure who bears a close resemblance to Cuchulainn.¹ It is possible that, as with Yvain, there was a historical Gawain who was a

Celtic prince in the north of England during the sixth century.² However, neither the historical Gawain nor his folk antecedents have a direct influence on the character of the hero in later Arthurian literature.³

In fact, there are two different Gawains in the Arthurian tradition: the Gawain of the chronicles and the Gawain of the romances. The oldest texts are from the chronicle tradition, but it has been well demonstrated that there were Gawain romances that preceded the first mention of Gawain in a chronicle.⁴ The character of Gawain as he develops in the chronicles is a relatively simple one. In the earlier works he is only one of Arthur's many heroes. In Historia Regum Britanniae for example, he is little more than a valiant, somewhat impetuous warrior who is rarely singled out for special mention. He is equated with his cousin Hoel,⁵ and such warriors as Kay and Bedwyr stand far above him.

The tendency of later chronicle writers to enlarge Gawain's role might be the result of influence from the lost Arthurian romances of the pre-Chretien period. Undoubtedly Wace knew of these tales but we cannot determine if they affected his portrait of Gawain.⁶ Certainly his Gawain in addition to valor shows something of the fraunchyse for which the later Gawain was well known.⁷ But Wace may have changed his character from that of a purely martial figure to that of a Norman knight simply because he gives the entire Arthurian section of his work the trappings of Norman chivalry. Nevertheless, the Norman

poet does suggest an intimate relationship between the king and his nephew that might have been borrowed from the romances. Layamon in his enlargement of Wace's chronicle enlarges and also exalts Gawain's position; he particularly praises the hero's loyalty.⁸

The image of Gawain that the chronicles present is of a sturdy, valorous, occasionally overly impetuous, warrior who is above all loyal to his king.⁹ The chronicle tradition thus scarcely prefigures the portrait that the romances give us of one of the most complex and mutable figures of Arthurian romance.

The work of the late R. S. Loomis has demonstrated the existence of a now lost tradition of Breton romance in which Gawain was the central figure.¹⁰ However, the earliest extant romance portrayal of Gawain is Chrétien's. Throughout his romances Gawain is presented as the supreme standard of knightly virtue. Perhaps because of his perfection he plays a secondary role in all of the works except for the unfinished conclusion of Perceval. For in all of Chrétien's romance there is a moral issue not fully satisfied by the hero,¹¹ and Gawain is usually blameless. Gawain's function is to serve as a standard of chivalry against which other knights are tested; either in battle, as in Cliges or Yvain, or in a comparison of adventures as in Lancelot or, perhaps, Perceval.¹² But his conception of Gawain as the ideal of chivalry did not originate with Chretien, for it is also found in the Lanzelet of Ulrich von Zatzikoven, which is believed to be based on a pre-Chretien romance.¹³

Chrétien, with his characteristic ability to create moral issues out of his legacy of Arthurian tradition, makes Gawain's excellence a combination of virtues. First, and a prerequisite for all of the others, is Gawain's valor and prowess; the best that any of Chrétien's heroes can hope for in combat with him is a draw. However, the most important virtues of Gawain, not only in Chrétien but elsewhere, are his courtesy and his trouthe. Gawain's courtesy admits of no simple explanation, as indeed, it is no simple virtue. B. J. Whiting believes that there is a close connection between Gawain's courtesy and his amatory prowess,¹⁴ and his views have influenced a generation of Gawain critics. However, this view is surely too limited, because courtesy is not always associated with love; in fact, in the Chansons de Geste these two are kept separate. Courtesy of course can be associated with love, as in the Roman de la Rose, but in early chivalric romance it is more commonly applied to relationships between men¹⁵ and is closely linked to three values: loyalty, mercy, and deference to others.

Gawain, as he appears in Chrétien's works, is often shown exhibiting one of these virtues, but he rarely plays the lover's role. In Le Chevalier de la Charrette he succumbs briefly to the charms of the lady Lunette, but nothing comes of it. It is only at the end of the Perceval, where he has his own independent adventures, that he is the typical courtly lover, but his role there is much more complex than that.

The deference to others, particularly strangers and women, is the essential link between the chivalric and romantic conceptions of chivalry, for the championing of ladies is a direct corollary of courtesy. But at the concluding part of the Perceval we explicitly see the difference between the two. Gawain is the Proud Lady's champion because he loves her, but he is also the disinterested champion of the Maid with the Little Sleeves. This deference to others, rather than the pursuit of women is the virtue for which Gawain is most noted in early Arthurian romance. He is always the successful intermediary between Arthur's court and a strange knight: Perceval, Evain or Cliges, as in Chrétien, or Lancelot in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's work.¹⁶ Gawain always wins the friendship of these knights through his courtesy and deference, in contrast to Sir Kay whose surly treatment of strangers and underlings always brings about his discomfiting.

Thus Gawain, the symbol of courtesy for Chrétien, is removed from the theme of love, courtly or otherwise, when the poet is lauding his courtesy. For Gawain's courtesy, as it appears in Chretien, is the older courtesy of the first feudal age, more akin to the Chansons than to the romances of courtly love. It is that virtue which accompanies dealings with others, especially those who are weak or unprotected, and is therefore often applied to ladies, but it is not in itself an aspect of amatory prowess. Gawain's role as a lover is essentially irrelevant to his role as a figure of courtesy.

At the heart of Chrétien's conception of courtesy is trouthe,

Gawain's special virtue.¹⁷ His only independent adventures in Chrétien's works take place at the end of Perceval and follow the typical pattern of his romances: a hero's attempt to deal with a moral conflict.

In Gawain's case, the moral problem is trouthe, for he pledges his word no less than four times in this short segment: first, to rescue the lady of Montesclaire; second to fight Guingambresil; third to seek the bleeding lance for the people of Cavallon; and finally to fight Guiromelant. But all of these vows get in the way of each other, so that none of them is accomplished within the narrative.¹⁸ Gawain is thus caught between conflicting loyalties, just as Erec is torn between his private pleasures and public duty, or Lancelot between the dictates of courtly love and of knightly honor, or Perceval is caught between his responsibility to his mother and his destiny of the Grail quest.¹⁹ Gawain's dilemma is connected with trouthe, because this virtue is at the core of his courtesy.

The chief virtues of Gawain as he appears in Chrétien's romances are substantially those of the earlier chivalric age: trouthe, courtesy, mercy and valor. The spirituality that is a part of Perceval is entirely absent from Gawain's nature; so too is the material of the model courtly lover that we see in the figure of Lancelot. Gawain is clearly an example of an older type of hero. It is not merely that his virtues are secular, or that he is promiscuous; rather his virtues arise from an earlier, perhaps simpler, time. For we must not

forget that behind Chrétien's portrayal of Gawain lie the earlier, now lost, Breton romances in which Gawain was the central hero. He is the earliest of the romance heroes and as such is the symbol of virtues that were later superseded in Arthurian romance. Indeed, Chaucer recognizes Gawain's essentially archaic quality when he refers to him as "Gawayn with his olde curteisye."²⁰

The notion of Gawain's promiscuity has been considered as one of the reasons for the hero's decline; for it is generally believed that Gawain underwent the process of epic degeneration in later Arthurian romance.²¹ However, one might more reasonably say that as new themes enter romance his importance diminishes. Thus, in the early Grail romances he does not achieve the Grail, but he still remains nearly peerless; achieving the Grail is simply not for him, but he is not demeaned by this failure. In fact, Gawain is the central figure of the first continuation of the Conte de Graal,²² and in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival he is second only to the transcendent figure of Parzival himself.²³ In the Perlesvaus Gawain fails to achieve the quest only because he is overly pious. It is only in the Queste del Saint Graal that any shame is attached to him, and this is because of his general position in the Vulgate cycle.

The great change in the presentation of Gawain is found in this section of the Vulgate. In the Merlin he is the typical Gawain of the chronicles. In the Lancelot, he is the typical Gawain of the romances: courteous, sensible, and valiant, and second only to the

protagonist.²⁴ However, he is disgraced at his visit to the Grail castle where his downfall begins. In the Queste he is the first to swear to search for the Grail, but of all the knights he is least successful. He fails to repent for his sins and murders several knights, including his sworn brother.²⁵ Gawain is a purely secular figure and by his failure the Cistercian author sought to emphasize the limitations of worldly chivalry.

The final change in Gawain's character takes place in the Mort Artu section. Paradoxically, it is in this section of the Vulgate that Gawain dominates the action and plays his most significant role in the Arthurian legend, for his desire for vengeance on Lancelot for the murder of his brothers leads to the destruction of the kingdom. Gawain chooses family loyalty over loyalty to his king. Thus, in order to satisfy his private vengeance he plunges the Arthurian world into chaos.²⁶ The knight who had been Arthur's chief support in the earlier romances thus becomes in the Vulgate responsible for the dismantling of the social order the king had attempted to establish. Gawain is condemned finally not just for his secularism but for his commitment to private vengeance and private warfare rather than loyalty to the king and maintenance of the common good.

Why does Gawain's role change so completely? Some of the answers, as with the question of the origins of the Epic of Revolt, can be found in the political situation of the times. The monastic writers of the Vulgate cycle were attempting to emphasize the importance of

monarchical rights over feudal rights and to strengthen the French throne. Thus, the implacable enemies of Arthur in the first part of the Vulgate are those feudal barons and petty kings who resist the loss of their power to a strong monarch. The result of this strong monarchy is a well-ordered society, although tragically flawed by the adultery of Lancelot and Guenevere. When their sin ultimately causes the feudal beliefs of private vengeance and warfare to reappear in the person of Gawain, the social order collapses. The cause of this collapse is the sin of the court, but the instrument is feudal passion.

The monkish authors of the Vulgate, then, were demonstrating the evils of feudalism, but why did they choose Gawain as the embodiment of the destructive powers of the older order? Precisely because of his position as the ideal of knighthood in the earlier romances.²⁷ He is the epitome of the Old Feudalism which is based on the old feudal order, or at least a remembrance of that order, and he is therefore a man whose loyalties are, at the last, to family honor and private vengeance. The ideals that he reflects are those of an earlier chivalry where the action and freedom of the individual are more important than the prerogatives of the monarchy. Arthur is, after all, frequently a roi fainéant in most of the romances that laud Gawain.²⁸

Many of the writers of the Vulgate cycle thus use Gawain's role in the tragedy of the Arthurian kingdom to demonstrate the failure and the danger of the type of chivalry and feudalism that Gawain came

to symbolize.

Here we see the curiously opposite development of the chronicle Gawain and the romance Gawain. In the former tradition, Gawain's role as one of the staunchest of the king's supporters never changes; but the Gawain of the romances, who begins as the Roland to Arthur's Charlemagne, later becomes a symbol of opposition to the power of the monarchy and to a centralized social order.

That the Vulgate version of Gawain was the result of political and social thinking and not a product of epic degeneration or of his unsavory sexual reputation is clearly demonstrated in later Gawain romances in French. For, in those romances which did not use the concept of Gawain as the symbol of destructive feudalism, his position is untarnished, and, if anything, exalted. Many independent verse romances, some of them written as late as the third quarter of the thirteenth century, continue to present Gawain as the ideal of worldly knighthood, against whom all other knights must be measured.²⁹ Even a late addition to the Vulgate cycle, the Livre D'Artus presents him in this manner.³⁰ Jean de Meun, writing in 1275, speaks of noble knights thus: "Chevaliers aus armes hardiz/Preuz en faiz e courteis par diz/ Si con fu mis sires Gauvains/ Qui ne fu pas parauz aus vains."³¹

The Continental tradition of Gawain follows two main branches: the chronicle tradition, in which his character is simple and remains constant, and the romance tradition in which he becomes a symbol of the older chivalry, for better or worse. In romances where the primary

interests of the authors are in the newer virtues of spirituality or courtly love he takes second place to such figures as Perceval, Lancelot, and Galahad. In those romances which seek in some way to discredit the older feudalism, often later works, he plays a destructive role. But in works which deal neither with fine amour nor the Grail quest, he retains his primacy.

The character and presentation of Gawain in Northern romance is linked to Gawain's representation as a symbol of the older feudalism. For if we accept the fact that the revival of feudalism in the North is in some way parallel to the old feudalism, then we would expect a character who exemplifies the older feudalism to be of some importance in the literature of the North. In fact, nowhere else in extant European literature is Gawain so glorified.³²

It is true that the Charlemagne romances were also representative of the first feudal era, but, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, Charlemagne romances were never really popular in the North because they were specifically French in origin. One of the hallmarks of Northern literature was its preoccupation with local affairs and local background, just as Northern society itself was rather insular. We have noted this localism in the intrusion of the Scottish milieu into the Carolingian setting of Rauf Coilgear. Arthur, of course, was British to the core, but Gawain had always been specifically associated with the North. As early as William of Malmesbury's Gesta Regum Anglorum we learn that Gawain ruled

Galloway³³ and Celticists have recently tried to find a historical model for Gawain in the sixth century North Welsh princes who struggled against the invading Anglo-Saxons.

This is not to accept the Weston thesis that there is any connection between these legends and the developed body of Northern romance. It is true that Gawain romances do exhibit a greater degree of independence from continental sources than do almost any other group of English romances,³⁴ but there is no evidence to suggest that an independent oral tradition lies in their ancestry. However, the character of Gawain in Northern romance³⁵ is perhaps the clearest indication we have of the close connection between the feudal revival in the North and the literature of that region.

We might begin our discussion of the Northern Gawain poems by demonstrating their uniqueness. For there is only one complete Gawain poem in Middle English in which his demeanor in any way suffers, The Jeaste of Sir Gawain,³⁶ and this work is the only non-Northern Gawain poem. By comparing it with a contemporary Northern work, Golagros and Gawain, we can see the range of attitudes towards the character of Gawain in the regions of Britain. Furthermore, we can see how the two romances work from a similar source, the First Continuation of the Conte de Graal.

The problem with the Jeaste is to determine which version of the First Continuation is used for the episode of the Lady of Lis. The distinction is important, for in one Gawain seduces the damsel, while

in the other he rapes her.³⁷ There are hints of both versions in the tale, but the story seems to indicate that the maiden is not raped, for her father says: "My douter's love he hath clenne wonne (vs. 314),"³⁸ and apparently agrees with Gawain's claim that the girl loved him. Since the first part of the story is missing, a final judgment would be difficult. One possibility is that the author knew both versions orally and confused the two.

R. W. Ackerman believes that the poet consciously shortened the work and did not include the second battle with Brandelis so that the poem would have a conclusion.³⁹ But his view is surely too limited in that it makes judgments that the author himself does not make. For, if the poem has any purpose at all, it is as a satire on medieval romance. One must be cautious about reading humor into medieval works, but the only alternative to accepting the comic elements of the romance would be to consider the author hopelessly incompetent. Yet his talent is proved by his ability to create a short, well-knit, narrative out of disparate elements and to clothe it in smooth versification.

Indeed, at the heart of the comedy of the poem is a sort of reversal of conventional expectations in romance, as well as a ridiculing of these expectations. Thus the father alternately convinces or dissuades his sons from fighting Gawain. Gawain himself reverses roles frequently. In the first part of the poem he is the typical paragon of courtesy, promising the lady's kinsmen that he will make amends rather than, as one critic has suggested, using his superior

prowess to avoid getting his due from the damsel's kinsmen.⁴⁰ After each successful combat he extracts a pledge from the loser not to harm the lady. He changes considerably, however, after his indecisive combat with Brandelis: his adversary refuses to make such a promise and Gawain coolly leaves the lady to the mercies of her brother.

After each of the combats, the loser's horse runs away and the defeated knight has to trudge off on foot, leaving Gawain master of the field. But at the end of the romance the hero himself loses his horse and because of the weight of his armor:

Hys knyf he toke in hande
 Hys armure good he cutte him fro
 Else on foot myghte he not goo
 Thus with care was he bande.
 (vss. 500-504)

Gawain goes back to court "on foot full weylie." Portraying a knight whose worth had been well proven in the first part of the romance in such a plight is either a mark of inconsistency or a sign of satiric intent. For the loss of one's horse in battle is a romance convention that symbolizes dishonor.⁴¹ Thus Gawain, after unhorsing the others, in accordance with his traditional prowess, is himself unhorsed and dishonored. His adversary, however, fares no better. The wronged family is last seen horseless, wounded, and scarcely able to walk. The damsel, instead of giving birth to a noble son, Le Bel Inconnu, as in other versions of the tale, simply disappears. The entire tone of the work is perhaps summed up by the author's comment on the grand and heroic oath of Brandelis and Gawain to fight to the death at some

future time: "And after that tyme they never mette more/ Full gladde were those knyghts therefore"(vss. 533-534).

The attitude of the poem, then, is one of anti-chivalric cynicism and burlesque. Compared with the Taill of Rauf Coilgear it is not as much a parody of romance conventions as it is of the notions behind chivalry. For in the Scots works the absurdities of Arthurian and Carolingian romance are burlesqued, but no one comes out badly, whereas such traditions as family honor, protection of ladies, and the upholding of oaths are ridiculed in the Jeaste.

Gawain is the principal target of the author's satire because, as on the Continent, he is a symbol of chivalric tradition. That such a symbol could be so thoroughly burlesqued is a mark of the desuetude into which the old customs had fallen in the south of England. For the author of Rauf, as we have seen, in his far gentler satire, appeared to shift the personages and the ambience from the more widely known Arthurian to the less cherished Carolingian. The author of the Jeaste, however, uses the presumably untouchable Gawain as his primary target.

Golagros and Gawain, a work roughly contemporary with the Jeaste, also deals with the material from the First Continuation⁴² and transforms it into something very much the author's own. However, while the author of the Jeaste attacks the chivalric code, the author of Golagros celebrates and at the same time investigates the essence of that code.⁴³

William Matthews believes that Golagros is a politically oriented poem dealing with the problems of imperial invasion and the maintenance of freedom by small powers.⁴⁴ This is perhaps related to the concern with imperial domination and the proper use of regal authority that appears in much of the Northern Arthurian romances. Some critics feel that this is evidence for the extent to which "the ever present fears of England demands for homage had become an obsession in the Scottish national mind."⁴⁵ Neither of these opinions fully comes to grips with the historical reality of the Northern situation at that time. For the same concerns are reflected in literature from both sides of the border. Indeed, Scottish literature of much of this period has no distinct character, at least in the area of romance, just as the political and social conditions on either side of the border were identical. The concern in these works is not with English imperialism, but rather with monarchical power in general.

We have already encountered a roughly analogous situation, that of the French barons in the middle of the twelfth century, a situation that engendered the Epic of Revolt. The status of the Northern barons, however, was not so threatened as was that of their French counterparts. Not until Henry VII was any serious attempt made to restrict the prerogatives of the English barons of the North, and none of the few vigorous Scottish kings lived long enough to make much headway against the Scottish nobility. Hence these English romances are not so much directed against the king as were the Epics of Revolt;

rather, they are directed in favor of baronial independence and the values of the older feudalism.

The political atmosphere behind Golagros is quite different from that of the Baron's cycle. Arthur does have tyrannical leanings, but he is not incorrigible as Louis is in Raoul de Cambrai. It is true that when Arthur wishes to undertake the war against Golagros his knights reply: "Mony ledis sal be lossit and liffis forlone/ Spekis na secceudery for Christis sone deir" (vss. 277-278).⁴⁶ And Arthur, like Herod in the Mystery plays, is beyond reasonable persuasion:⁴⁷ "Thar was na man that durst mell to the King/ Quhan thai saw that mighty sa mouit in his mynde." (vss. 299-300) However, unlike Louis in Raoul de Cambrai, or Charlemagne in The Sege of Melayne, the king does not have to be forced to reform. He learns from the example of Gawain and at the end of the romance plays the gracious conqueror and leaves the country in Golagros' hands.

However, the author's main interest is chivalry and courtesy. Although the political issue is certainly central, it is reflected rather in the author's chief concern for the relationship between courtesy and the sometimes conflicting demands of chivalry. For the problems brought on by Arthur's imperial ambition are solved only through Gawain's courtesy.

The first incident of the narrative, the foraging expedition to the castle of Spinagros, reflects an uncomplicated aspect of Gawain's courtesy. He is conventionally contrasted with the figure of "Kay the

crabbed," who is impolite to his host and soundly beaten. Gawain, as always, succeeds, through his politeness, not only in acquiring the needed supplies but also in gaining a valuable ally for Arthur's campaign. In the first part, Gawain also acts as an envoy to Golagros, where he is typically courteous in his attempt to convince Golagros to render homage to Arthur.

But the last example of Gawain's courtesy, when he is willing to place himself in his enemy's hands to avoid killing him, suggests a far more idealized virtue. Gawain's rigid conception of chivalry prevents him from killing a fallen foe, but Golagros' rigid conception of honor prevents him from yielding. An impasse has been reached because these two aspects of chivalry contradict each other. Gawain, of course, cannot simply free Golagros, since his trouthe commands him to fight the enemies of his king. The situation is resolved only by the selflessness of Gawain: he agrees to allow himself to be seemingly taken prisoner to avoid Golagros' humiliation before his own people.

The courtesy that Gawain exhibits in this scene is a development of the aspect of courtesy as consideration of others, but it is much more transcendent than mere politeness or aid granted to ladies in distress. Mesure has been a part of courtesy since the Chanson de Roland, and twelfth century France refined the concept to include love. In this romance, however, Gawain exemplifies qualities of selflessness more akin to the courtesy found in the works of the Gawain poet than to

the fine amour courtesy based in the French romances.

But Gawain is not the only courteous figure in the romance, for all of his actions and virtues are paralleled by those of Golagros. An easy identification between the two is made when they both scorn death. Gawain says "Gif I de doughtely the les is my dere/ Thocht he wa Sampson himselfe sar me Christe reid" (vss. 809-811). Golagros states "me think farar to dee/Than chany be verralie/Ane sclander to byde" (vss. 1035-1038).

In addition to his courage, Golagros possesses that same quality of selflessness that Gawain has, and demonstrates it when he accedes to the wishes of his people and pays homage to Arthur. In the early part of the romance he has been the proud advocate of feudal independence and delivers the most ringing defense of freedom short of Barbour:

"If I for obeisance or boist to bondage me bynde
I war wourthy to be
Hingit heigh on ane tre
That ilk creature might se
To waif with the wind."

(vss. 436-441)

And also:

"Na for dreid of na ded, na for na distance
I will noght bow me and bak for berne that is borne.
Quhill I may my wit wald
I think my fredome to hald
As my eldaris of ald
Has done me beforene."

(vss. 448-453)

Yet, in spite of his own wishes, Golagros does yield to Gawain and

does homage to Arthur because he realizes that as a ruler his life is not his own to choose and that the wishes of his people come before his loyalty to the chivalric code. Golagros is thus the noble adversary, like Aymer de Valence in The Bruce, and is as admirable as the hero.

Throughout the poem there is a central conflict between feudal independence and monarchical prerogative, as personified by the figures of Golagros and Gawain. But a solution to this conflict is reached at the end of the work because of their mutual courtesy. Golagros pays homage to Arthur, but Arthur, inspired perhaps by the courtesy of his nephew, returns the land to Golagros "fre as I the first fand/ Withoutin distance"(vss. 1361-1362). Thus, Arthur has gained his opponent's submission, but Golagros has not lost his freedom.

Gawain thus has a dual role in the story. As in Chretien's romances he is the standard of courtesy and knightly honor. Golagros is ennobled by his matching courtesy and his nearly equal prowess. However, Gawain, besides being the ideal, is also the prime mover of the romance, unlike the Gawain of Chretien who seldom directly affects the hero's course of action.⁴⁸ Whether in the first or second part of this work, the tensions aroused between monarch and baron are always reconciled through Gawain's virtue, and this virtue is almost exclusively courtesy.

The romance of Golagros and Gawain is perhaps the clearest example in Northern Middle English romance that Gawain's courtesy

is not inextricably linked with his amorousness. The author has made several changes from his original source, the First Continuation, but there is a clear pattern in his changes: he suppresses anything that has to do with love.⁴⁹ He omits the story of the affair between Gawain and the Lady of Lys and changes the motivation for Gawain's opponent's refusal to yield. Golagros' original, Le Riche Soudier, disdains surrender, not because of his baronial pride, but because he fears to be dishonored in the sight of his mistress.⁵⁰ Thus, the Scottish poet has taken a romance originally centered around love and has reshaped it into an examination of the conflict between baronial independence and monarchical ambition. In the course of his work he presents a courtesy free from either fine amour or specifically Christian connotations.

To compare The Jeaste of Sir Gawain with Golagros and Gawain is to demonstrate the gap between the literary traditions of Northern and non-Northern Britain during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Jeaste satirizes the conventional elements of Arthurian romance: heroism, love, chivalry, and honor. Golagros, however, transforms conventions that are already worn out for the Jeaste poet into a more "primitive" romance.⁵¹ Actually, it is not at all primitive; the work focuses more on the realities of the feudal experience and less on the pleasure and problems of court life. Some writers feel that Chrétien's poem represents the transition from the first feudal age to the second, but in Northern English romance we see these newer

elements of his works, courtly love, spirituality, and manners, being replaced by values that are, perhaps, more appropriate to the later Chansons de Geste.

The theme of disinheritance, which is a major one in the Epic of Revolt, is common in Northern Gawain poems and is found particularly in The Awntyrs of Arthur at the Tarn Wadling. Its style and theme are so close to Golagros, that at one time they were thought to have been written by the same poet.⁵² However, it preceded the Middle Scots work by at least half a century and testifies to the continuing concern with feudal prerogatives in this section of Britain.⁵³

Like Golagros and Gawain, the work consists of two thematically related parts. The first episode prepares us for the second. In the first one, Guenevere is confronted by the ghost of her mother. The Queen is protected only by Gawain, and she accuses her other knights of discourtesy. Fortunately, Gawain is equal to the situation and begins a colloquy with the spirit. She condemns Arthur for his oppressiveness and rapacity and warns the Queen that the worst sin is pride and that the surest way of achieving Heaven is through alms. The ghost then concludes by prophesying the fall of Arthur's kingdom: she relates the chronicle version, but omits Guenevere's part.

The first section is thus on the order of a homily, not unlike The Debate between the Body and the Soul. In its political overtones, the work has some resemblance to such Northern protest poems as Winnere and Wastoure. But the poem is a romance as well as a

religious and political tract; the private virtues emphasized in the spirit's speech, humility, mercy, and liberality, are also public ones and appear in the second part of the poem.

Part of Arthur's covetousness has been to take away the lands of Galeron of Galloway and to give them to Gawain, a deed for which Galeron demands justice. Thus we recognize the theme of disinheritance, a theme that is part of the Epic of Revolt and of such Northern poems as Barbour's The Bruce, where the worst crime of the English is to deprive the Bruce and the Douglas of their rightful inheritance. This threat was a reality in the North of this era. For example, after the death of Hotspur, his father, the earl of Northumberland, was denied his patrimony. On similar occasions, members of the Douglas family were deprived of their feudal rights. Furthermore, possession of one's land and the right of inheritance is at the core of the feudal system.

In The Awntyrs of Arthur, then, Arthur's tyranny lies not in his willfulness or pride, as Herod's does in the Mystery plays, nor in his imperial ambition as it does in Golagros and the Alliterative Morte Arthure, but in his interference with the fundamental rights of his vassals.

We must be careful not to develop too limited a view. Gawain is not always the noble adversary of a tyrannical king, for the Northern magnates were not as threatened by the monarchy as the French barons were during the period of the composition of the Epics of Revolt.

Besides, we must not make the mistake of confusing romance with political poetry. It is true that Arthur is frequently tyrannical, but Gawain is not always the sole agent through which his tyranny is overcome. In this romance it is Guenevere.

The dispute over Galeron's land is settled by a single combat between Galeron and Gawain in which the latter is expectedly victorious. But Guenevere, mindful of the warnings of her mother's spirit, heeds Galeron's mistress' plea for mercy and stops the fight. Just as Gawain's courtesy inspires Arthur in *Golagros*, so does Guenevere's in The Awntyrs. The King offers to make Gawain a duke if he will cede the disputed lands to Galeron, and Gawain, with his characteristic generosity, assents readily. The romance then ends happily with the marriage of Galeron and his lady.

As in *Golagros*, the adversary of the king is treated at least as sympathetically as anyone else in the romance. Galeron's cause is just, and he proves himself to be the equal of Gawain in courtesy and very nearly his equal on the battlefield. During the combat, Gawain's horse is killed and Galeron promptly dismounts to keep the combat equal.

Arthur is openly accused of tyranny in the first part of the poem,⁵⁴ just as he is portrayed as covetous and proud in the first part of Golagros. But, as in the Scottish poem, he reforms at the end and redresses his tyrannical acts. In each case the agent of change is either Gawain or Gawain and Guenevere, but the King, unlike many of

the tyrants of medieval literature, does reform. Thus, instead of the narrow, anti-monarchical, bias of the Epics of Revolt, the romance, a product of the less threatened baronial society of the North, allows for a more generous attitude towards the monarchy.

The Awntyrs of Arthur is a clear reflection of the values of Border society. The work is no doubt related to the political situation of the day, although we cannot be sure precisely which events it refers to. In addition to its concerns with the issues of feudalism and chivalry, the poem also exhibits characteristics that mark Northern romance. Just as the atmosphere of the moors of Scotland pervades the Carolingian setting of Rauf Coilgear, so does the setting of Cumberland imbue The Awntyrs. For Arthur's court is in no mythical place, but in Carlisle, the county seat. The encounter with the spirit takes place not in some imaginary forest but around the lake Wadling in Inglewood forest, a place long associated with Arthur throughout Northern romance and tradition.⁵⁵

While a stylistic analysis lies outside this study, we can note that the work reveals close connections with the poems of the Northern alliterative tradition. Not only is the work stylistically close to Golagros and Gawain, but it exhibits distinct borrowings from Gawain and the Green Knight.⁵⁶

Golagros and The Awntyrs are at the core of the Northern conception of Gawain and we can now make some attempt to understand the nature of the courtesy that he is endowed with in the works of the

North. Certainly, we cannot accept Matthews' claim that Gawain is "a blend of Galahad and the Gauvain of the Chronicles."⁵⁷ Such a viewpoint derives essentially from the Whiting thesis that there is an inextricable link between Gawain's courtesy and his sexuality. But the courtesy that Gawain represents in these two romances is like his courtesy in most of Chretien's work: he is the foil of Arthur, a merciful knight who defers to those weaker than himself and who keeps his trouthe. However, in the chronicle tradition Gawain never develops this sense of courtesy; one has but to compare the chronicle Gawain's embassy to the emperor Lucius with Gawain's embassy to Spinagros: in the case of the first, a war is the outcome, in the other, a reconciliation.

There is little of Galahad in the Gawain of the alliterative romances. In all of these works the primary focus is on his secular virtues rather than on any spiritual qualities he might have, and these secular virtues are always separated from the domain of fine amour. The Gawain of Golagros and The Awntyrs belongs to the romance rather than to the chronicle tradition and, as in the case of the continental versions, he represents the older chivalric virtues. In Northern romance, however, this representation ennobles rather than debases him.

English romance is always classified by subject matter or by metrical form, as in Wells' Manual, or in the discussion of Arthurian romance in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages,⁵⁸ but the

geographical differences may be even more important for our understanding of the values and meaning of a romance. This is certainly so in the North, for not only do similar themes and values transcend the division of the Matters, whether they be historical, Carolingian or Arthurian, but they also transcend the differences in poetic form. The stanzaic poems differ little in their treatment of Gawain from that of the alliterative works.

Let us look at one of the best of the stanzaic Gawain poems: The Avowyngge of Arthur, Kay and Syr Baldwyn of Britain. As in the romances of Chrétien and in the two alliterative romances discussed above, there are common motifs: Gawain is contrasted with Kay and, through the efforts of the former, a strange knight is won to the Round Table. Thus, Kay attempts to rescue a maiden from one Menealfe of the Mountain, but he fails and is captured. Gawain, however, successfully jousts twice with the knight; first, to rescue Kay, and then to rescue the lady.

But in addition to his characteristic valor, Gawain is also characteristically magnanimous towards his enemy. For example, Kay jeers at Menealfe when he is defeated, but Gawain replies sagely: "A mon's hoppe is notte ay/ is non so sekur of a say/ Butt he may harmes hente (xxii, 6-8).⁵⁹ After the joust, Menealfe is taken back to court where his judgment is placed in the hands of the Queen. Gawain intercedes for his former enemy, and, like so many of Gawain's acquaintances, the knight is allowed to join the Round Table.

Although Gawain is not the main hero of the romance, special care is taken to insure his place, for he is praised on three different occasions by three different characters. The damsel whom he rescues "louit with a mylde cheere/ God and Sir Gawen (xxxii, 6-8)." The King, when he hears of Gawain's deeds, is equally enthusiastic:

"Gret god' quod the King
 "Gif Gawen gode ending
 For he is siker alle kynne thing
 To cowunter with a knyghte.
 Of all playus he beres the prise,
 Loos of the ladies.

(xxiv, 1-6)

The Queen is also thankful:

"Now, " said the quene, "God almyghte
 Save Gawan my knyghte
 Tat thus for women con fyghte
 Fro wothus him were."

(xxxvi, 1-4)

Although Gawain is celebrated in the first half of the romance, he is neglected in the second part. For the hero of the second half of the romance is the rather mysterious Baldwyn of Britain; a character unknown outside of this work. The focus is on his three vows, not to be jealous of his wife or of any woman, not to refuse food to anyone, and not to fear death; all of them proofs of his self-control.⁶⁰ This is certainly a curious shift in the work, but we have seen a similar structure composed of two independent but thematically related stories in both Golagros and The Awntyrs. Perhaps the same pattern is at work here.

The theme of the tale is not just the heroism of Gawain, nor

the moral qualities of Baldwin; it is, rather, a study of the nature of knighthood. Gawain represents the active side of chivalric virtue, while Baldwin represents the more passive, contemplative, side. Thus self-control, temperance, wisdom, and liberality are as important for the ideal knight as courtesy, mercy, and valor. There is no attempt to weigh the two types against each other, for both Gawain and Baldwin are exemplary. Rather, it is an attempt of the poet to venture beyond the exterior social and martial aspects of chivalry into its moral, more private, demands. As such, it is a comment on the chivalry of the North, rather than, as in Golagros or The Awntyrs, a celebration of it. The poet is, perhaps, demonstrating the limitations of the more common attitude and is probing into the ethical nature of chivalry. He is, of course, not the first to do so, but his moral inquiry is not at the expense of conventional chivalry, for Gawain's courtesy in this romance is identical with that of the other works discussed above. Gawain's courtesy here, as in all Northern romances, features valor, mercy, respect for an enemy, and deference towards ladies, although not necessarily love for them.

The Avowyngge thus points out one of the chief qualities of Northern romance: its heterogeneous attitude in the broader field of chivalry. While all of the Northern romances deal with the problems of chivalry and feudalism, they by no means present a single viewpoint. Some of them, like Golagros, glorify chivalry, while others, like The Avowyngge, point out the limitations of the conventional concept

of it. But all of them treat chivalry and feudalism as a living, vital phenomenon rather than as a literary convention. The presence of such varied attitudes about the same themes perhaps is due to the presence of several literary centers, for there were several feudal magnates in the North who could have supported their own poets.

Among the best known of the poems dealing with Gawain is the so-called "Loathely Lady" group. But the most famous of the group, Chaucer's Wyf of Bath's Tale, has an anonymous hero who bears scant resemblance to the Gawain of either English or Continental romance. The knight himself is a boorish, rather shadowy, figure in the grand design of the work, and Chaucer's treatment of him is not based on the Gawain of Northern romance.⁶¹

The two Gawain romances of the group, The Weddyng of Syr Gawene and Dame Ragnell, and The Marriage of Sir Gawain, present special problems of their own. The Marriage is a late border ballad that survives only in a badly mutilated text. The romance is more complete, but survives in an East Midlands rather than specifically Northern dialect.⁶² But, as in many cases, the dialect does not necessarily indicate the provenance of the original work. The fact that the poem also exists in a Northern form, the ballad, would suggest that the tale originated in the North. More importantly, the locale of the romance is quite specific: Arthur's court is located at Carlisle and he does his hunting in Inglewood forest.⁶³ In addition to these suggestions of Northern origin, the treatment of the theme points

out typically Northern motifs.

The original crisis in the plot is, as usual, brought on by Arthur. He is surprised and captured while hunting by Sir Gromersomerjoure because of a typical act of tyranny. He has taken away the knight's lands and given them to Gawain, the same motif that appears in The Awntyrs. The crisis is resolved only through Gawain's knightly perfection.

The theme of the work is thus unquestionably Northern: Gawain's virtue solves a problem brought on by Arthur's tyranny. The Northern ambience has considerably shifted the usual structure of the Loathly Lady story. In the other versions, it is the hero who is faced with death unless he finds the answer to the question of what women most desire. Here, Gawain is willing to take upon his own shoulders the burden of marrying the hag because of his loyalty to his king.⁶⁴

R. W. Ackerman believes that the author is a "meager" story teller and cites the difference between the revulsion of Chaucer's knight at the thought of marrying the Hag and the lack of subtlety or refinement of feeling in Gawain's determination.⁶⁵ Gawain states that "Ys thiss alle?" then sayd Gawen, / "I shalle wed her and wed her agayn, / Thowghe she were as fould as Belsabub" (vss. 342-344).⁶⁶ But the hero of the romance is Gawain, not some anonymous ill-bred knight, and it is a measure of his courtesy, as well as his trouthe, that he will do anything for his king. After the lengthy description of the Hag there is no need for the author to further emphasize the horror

of such a union, and Gawain's heroic indifference is simply another example of his chivalric perfection.

There is another significant difference in the yielding of sovereignty to the wife. Gawain's yielding is essentially more courteous than that of Chaucer's knight. The latter knows the answer to the question of what women most desire; therefore, his decision is not so unexpected. Since Gawain has not been told the answer, his surrender of sovereignty is more of an instinctive act and represents a deference to others that is central to his courtesy. Surely this is why the Hag says to Gawain: "A, Gawen, syn I have you wed/ Show me your courtesy in bed" (vss. 629-630). She is not, as Whiting suggests, pointing out the inextricable link between Gawain's courtesy and his amorous ability,⁶⁷ but rather suggesting to Gawain that his courtesy includes deference to those who are powerless. For all of her magic cannot improve her situation of being a loathly hag.

The poet is quick to point out that Gawain's deference is not the same as surrender. To avoid the absurdity of a peerless knight ruled by his wife, he has the maistrise return to Gawain. His transformed wife tells him:

"Therefore curteys knight and hend Gawen,
 Shall I never wrath the steyn.
 That pmyse nowe her I make
 Whille that I live I shall be obeysant.
 To God above, I shall itt warrant
 And never with you to debate."
 (vss. 780-786)

The ending of the work seems to be out of joint with the rest of

it. Gawain, we are told, loved his wife so much that he abandoned tournaments to stay with her. Perhaps the author was simply at the mercy of his sources, but it is also possible that the ending is thematically related to the rest. Gawain's uxoriousness is simply an excess of the virtue that characterizes him throughout the poem. That same deference to others that makes him obedient to his king is the same force behind his too great devotion to his wife. Possibly the author is aware that courtesy can lead to courtly love. His solution to the problem of his protagonist brought low by love is to have Dame Ragnell die at an early age and to portray Gawain as having many wives.

Thus, Gawain's courtesy is at the heart of the romance and appears in the form of deference to others rather than mercy or trouthe. His courtesy in fact is what disenchant the Hag, not a kiss as in the original version of the Fier Baiser.⁶⁸ Is there perhaps some connection between Gawain's role as the courteous knight and the fact that he so often is chosen to play the part of the disenchanter? This role is not always assigned to him; many of the versions of the Fier Baiser or the Decaptiated Host theme use an entirely different character.⁶⁹ Perhaps there is simply a natural accretion of story to a major hero, but there might also be a link between his ability to deal courteously with strangers and his ability to deal with strange beings. Certainly all of the disenchantment stories that he appears in require a test of courtesy as part of the disenchantment.

A more clearly Northern work which reflects this combination

of Gawain's courtesy and his ability to disenchant is Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle. The work, in its surviving form, is in a notably less aristocratic tone than the alliterative Gawain poems, or such stanzaic poems as The Avowyngge, and seems to have been written by a minstrel.⁷⁰ But the two surviving versions are at least three removes from the original text, and the first version might have been more baronial. Curiously, one of the versions omits the decapitation episode.⁷¹

The poem, with its clear love of the bluff, ill-tempered, commoner, is reminiscent of much of Rauf Coilgear, although it is by no means as skillfully written. Whereas one might perceive elements of fairly sophisticated parody in Rauf, the tone of The Carl is too crude to allow for much more than a burlesque. As in the more serious works of the Gawain cycle, there is a typical contrast between Kay and Gawain, and Gawain's actions are characteristically courteous. His deference to others, however, is not tested, nor his mercy, nor his trouthe. What is tested is, more simply, his manners, how readily he acquiesces to his host's often outrageous demands. His courtesy is established through several tests, each of which is designed to measure his obedience to the Carl.⁷²

But in addition to the test of his courtesy, there is also a trial of his gentilesse, as defined in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale; that is, the extension of courtesy to someone who is socially inferior.⁷³ For the poet expresses a continual awareness of class and social distinction.

Kay and Bishop Baldwin fail their tests of courtesy because they fail to respect the Carl. Their snobbery is portrayed when they attempt to turn the Carl's horse out of the stable and into the rain to provide room for their own, more costly, animals. The Carl pays them back with a beating. Gawain, however, moves his own horse out of the way to provide more room for the Carl's pony, and shows the same deference to his base-born host that he would be expected to show towards a more noble one.

Thus he throws a spear at the Carl, refrains from having amorous thoughts about the Carl's wife, gets into bed with her but desists from making advances and then spends the night with the Carl's daughter, all at his host's bidding. On the morrow he again obeys the Carl's order, and decapitates him. Perhaps the keynote of the trials is the one with the Carl's wife. Unlike some versions of the story, Gawain's chastity is not being tested, for he is later given the daughter; nor is it a test of trouthe, for the Carl remains in the room. Rather, it is a simple test of obedience, for the romance is built around the motif of the Imperious Host.⁷⁴

Courtesy is therefore represented as humility, a respect for the relationship between guest and host, regardless of their social standing, a courtesy therefore not dependent on social rank. It is this element of "class consciousness," for want of a better word, that makes Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle unique among the complete romances of the North. Even Rauf Coilgear could easily have been a

product of the upper class. In most of the Northern romances the courteous treatment is between equals. Both sides have the proper attitudes pertaining to the relationships between members of the nobility. The enemy knights in the Gawain romances, Sir Gromersomerjoure, Galeron, Golagros, and even Menealfe are usually nearly as courteous as Gawain. But the Carl, who promises Gawain only a "carl's courtesy" is ultimately as courteous as any of the more nobly born characters of the other romances. After he is disenchanted through decapitation, he makes full amends for his misdeeds, marries his daughter to Gawain, and is made a member of the Round Table.

The penetration of feudal values to the lower classes in the North has been pointed out earlier; it was partly the result of the border situation and partly the result of the traditional method of military service for land tenure. Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, one of the few genuinely popular Northern works, is an indication of this phenomenon. Gawain is not ridiculed, for there is no anti-aristocratic bias; rather, the author demonstrates that courtesy should operate on all levels of society. The tone of the work is certainly crude, but it still reflects the same traditional values found in the more aristocratic works of Northern romance.

As in so many of the Northern works, there is a precise sense of locale, particularly of the area where the poem was originally composed. The onset of the storm during the hunt is couched in terms

familiar to readers of other nature descriptions of Northern poets. The writer also shows his familiarity with Carlisle in his detailed information on the location of the cathedral.⁷⁵

The poem reflects the unique historical situation of the North in still another way. In no region of Britain was there such a fusion of three disparate traditions, the Celtic, the English, and the Scandinavian, and nowhere in the North was this mixture more pronounced than in Cumberland.⁷⁶ In fact, Cumberland remained Celtic longer than any other part of England, and its proximity to Galloway may have facilitated the direct transmission of motifs from the Celtic tradition. For, although the Carl has many European analogues, none of these analogues combines the Imperious Host theme with the visit to Curoi's castle.⁷⁷ This suggests that the poet was drawing upon a local tradition. That he could draw upon such archaic Celtic material was the result of the special ethnic composition of Cumberland during the Middle Ages.

Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle is not the only Northern romance that contains a mixture of traditions and a striking independence from continental sources. Another work in the Percy folio, The Turk and Gawain, also draws heavily on indigenous material, and contains a head cutting scene that is remarkably similar to the one in The Carl.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, our text is badly mutilated, and the version itself is no more than a wreckage of what once might have been an

imposing Gawain story. Gawain is the main character, but the romance primarily deals with a trip to the other world and, perhaps, draws on the Pelerinage de Charlemagne tradition. As Webster points out, the series of trials are quite similar in the two works, and in both cases the hero passes his tests through the assistance of a supernatural being.⁷⁹ The problem with The Turk is that there are serious inconsistencies within the tale. At first, Gawain is to travel to the Isle of Man to receive a return blow from the Turk. But instead, at the end of the work, Gawain gives another one to the Turk that has the effect of disenchanting him. An even more serious flaw in the nature of the tests. Gawain does not actually pass any of them through his own abilities; he is aided, either visibly or invisibly, by the Turk. His own role, with the exception of the decapitation of the Turk, is curiously passive. Apparently, the general theme of Gawain's success in passing certain tests and then disenchanting a strange figure has been contaminated by the Pelerinage tradition of the helpful angel, and the result is that the tests are ultimately meaningless.

The author, in borrowing from the Pelerinage tradition, assigned the role of the supernatural helper to the Turk, but in so doing destroyed any rationale for the story. For if the Turk is the fearsome creature to be disenchanted by a knight's virtue, then why does he aid Gawain? And, if Gawain has to first prove his valor, then why are the feats actually accomplished by the Turk? The answer is that just as Rauf Coilgear is a romance where the true sources,

Arthurian romance of the North, are twisted to the Matter of France, so here the Matter of Britain is rather crudely forced onto a background of diffuse traditions.⁸⁰ However, in the case of Rauf, the result is a first rate romance, because, while the Carolingian figures act out of character, they never act inconsistently, whereas in The Turk the combination of the traditions leads to a melange of contradictory events. While some of the confusion may be due to the fragmented nature of the text, it is more likely that the author of The Turk was a slave to his sources, rather than their master.

The poet's inability to reconcile his sources results in a contradictory image of Gawain. At the beginning of the work, he is conventionally contrasted with Kay and plays his usual role of welcoming the strange knight. His role at the end of the romance is also conventional. Through his second decapitation of the Turk, the latter is disenchanted.. The transformed knight accompanies Gawain back to Arthur's court, where he offers Gawain the rule of the Isle of Man. The offer is graciously refused and the hero begs Arthur to return it to the Turk.

But along with this representative portrayal of Gawain there is one of the blackest representations of him in English literature. He is a complaining coward who is continually demanding food and is continually wishing that he were back with Arthur. At the outset of his journey with the Turk he vows not to be afraid, but before long "Syr Gawain was never se adread/ sith he was man on middle earth/ and

cryd on god in this thought" (vss. 213-215).⁸¹

The image of the frightened Gawain is even more unheroic than anything found in The Jeaste. At least in that work Gawain is a valiant figure in spite of his moral callousness or occasionally ridiculous appearance. Nevertheless, the general inadequacy of the author of The Turk rules out any serious intent in his portrait of his hero. The poet's inability to handle his traditional material is also reflected in his weak versification and his incoherent plot. The Turk and Gawain may be a fruitful field for the folklorist, and it does reflect the Northern tradition in its blend of local legends, but it is too chaotic and incompetent to be a serious reflection of any of the themes of the North.

It might be pointed out that those Northern works which are the least polished and evince the least amount of artistic skill are invariably those which deal less with the problems of feudalism, chivalry, and the essence of courtesy, and more with the common stock of English romance: adventure and marvellous happenings. On the other hand, those romances which are more certainly the product of serious writers do deal at some length with the issues of trouthe, baronial rights, fairness to enemies, and courteous dealings, themes that are so prevalent in Northern history. It would be rash to say that only the better writers were employed by the baronial courts, but one could say that those romance writers who had a fair degree of literary ability seemed to respond to the problems of Northern culture and the

phenomenon of the feudal revival of the region.

The best demonstration of this artistic response to the society of the North is the greatest romance written in the area, or anywhere else in England for that matter: Gawain and the Green Knight. It is beyond the scope of this study to present a general interpretation of the work, and there are many aspects of the romance that will have to be left out. Its connection with other works of the Pearl poet, its metrical form, its religious themes, its relationship to its sources, these are all fertile fields that have been well plowed since the dawn of English studies. We can instead focus on only a few points: the relationship of Gawain to other works of the Northern romance tradition, the extent to which it reflects the historical situation of the North, and its connection to the major aspects of Northern culture.

Part of the problem with the romance is the question of provenance. It is not as purely a Northern work as the other Gawain romances; its dialect is Northwest Midlands, and Tolkien and Gordon attribute the poem to the area of northern Cheshire or Southern Lancashire, the fringes of the North.⁸² There has been a great deal of effort, notably by H. L. Savage, to locate precisely the patron of the Gawain poet,⁸³ and another scholar has recently suggested that John of Gaunt could have been the patron.⁸⁴ While some of these attempts may bring up useful information, it is sufficient for our purposes to accept the locale of the Northwest Midlands. Although southern Lancashire and northern Cheshire were not as central to Northern society as

Cumberland, they were still a part of the feudal revival and reflected a similar political pattern. The region was controlled by powerful local barons who were often immune from the royal writ. While the area was not as open to border raids as Cumberland, it did suffer from frequent deprivations by the Scots during the fourteenth century.⁸⁵

Although technical analysis of alliterative verse and poetic technique is beyond the range of this study, it is relevant that the work follows the traditions and style of Northern rather than Southern alliterative verse. The Alliterative Morte Arthur, for example, is much closer in style to Gawain and the Green Knight than is Piers Plowman or William of Palerne.⁸⁶ The work of the Gawain poet belongs firmly within the tradition of the Northern alliterative romance. Nevertheless, Marie Borroff has pointed out that the work's technique does differ from that of the more northerly works.⁸⁷ Perhaps this is related to the poem's provenance; just as it is on the fringes of the North, so the technique is not purely Northern.

Perhaps the most highly praised element of Gawain and the Green Knight is its structure, not only its unity but also the poet's careful attention to organization. Particularly praiseworthy is the author's use of the two motifs of the Beheading Bargain and the Temptations. There is still controversy over who was responsible for combining the two motifs, and it is still an open question.⁸⁸ But even if the Gawain poet had found the two themes combined in a now lost French original, his own genius is still reflected in his ability to

interweave the two themes so that they ultimately reflect a common virtue: trouthe.⁸⁹

Yet Gawain and the Green Knight is not alone in its quality of unity or its use of thematically related parts. As Benson points out, "one finds the same concerns with parallels, contrasts, and variations in the narrative structures of poems such as the Morte Arthure, Golagros and The Awntyrs of Arthur."⁹⁰ In many of the good short romances of the North we find, uncharacteristically for Middle English romance, concern for structure and unity. Even non-Arthurian works like Rauf Coilgear are based on the use of separate incidents which reflect a common theme. Thus, the warnings of Guenevere's mother in The Awntyrs have a profound effect on the action of the second half of the poem, and Gawain's courtesy in the second half of Golagros is prefigured by his actions in the first half. In The Avowyngge, two different views of chivalry are presented: the martial side and the moral side. In Rauf Coilgear the motifs of the king in disguise and the conversion of a pagan knight are linked by the common theme of the courtesy to be shown to strangers.

If it is difficult to relate the structural distinctiveness of Northern poetry to the historical situation of the region, the common feature of unity does reflect the uniqueness and homogeneity of the North and its culture. In this respect, then, Gawain and the Green Knight certainly belongs to the Northern tradition rather than to the loosely structured romances that were written in the South and

Midlands.⁹¹ But the Gawain poet transcends his traditions, for, instead of presenting the two parallel motifs separately, as the other romances do, he interweaves them into one plot.

It is not only matters of technique that Gawain and the Green Knight resembles the works of the mainstream of Northern romance. Its close attention to locale also relates it to the Northern tradition. Thus, when Gawain goes in search of the Green Chapel we are told that:

Til þat he neged ful neghe into þe Norþe Wales
 Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lygt half he haldeþ
 And fareþ over þe fordeþ by þe forlondeþ
 Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
 In þe wydrenesse of Wyrle.

(vss. 687-90)⁹²

Although the poet's references are in many cases obscure, part of the journey can be traced on a map. As Tolkien and Gordon point out, the author shows considerable familiarity with the locale. As in most romances, however, Gawain ultimately wanders off the map and, although there have been many attempts to locate the place of the Green Chapel, no one has yet offered conclusive evidence. Yet, it has been suggested by many scholars that when Gawain does wander into unknown lands he is riding north, which would be into Cumberland, and that the "forest ful dep, that ferly watþ wylde" is in fact Inglewood forest, the site of most of the adventures of Arthur and Gawain in Northern romance.⁹³

In addition to his geographical accuracy, the Gawain poet also

relates to the Northern romance writers in his sensitivity towards nature. Indeed, Laura Hibbard Loomis points out his uncharacteristic appreciation of the less pleasant side of nature, and likens his awareness of the winter landscape to Keats'.⁹⁴ But, as we have observed earlier, the description of the storm-tossed landscape is in many ways a set piece in Northern romance. We find it most notably in The Awntyrs of Arthur, but it also appears in Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and in Rauf Coilgear. Again, as in the issue of unity, the Gawain poet transcends his contemporaries at the same time that he shows his close connection with them.

The sources of Gawain and the Green Knight were a focus for much of the early work done on the romance. Most of the questions raised, and answered, by these studies remain outside the range of this study, but it is clear that all of the closest analogues in Middle English are from the North. Some scholars believe that this is the result of direct transmission from Celtic to English in the region of Cumberland, and that the Northern traditions of Arthur were carried over into English.⁹⁵ The problem with this approach is that it flies in the face of the great amount of material pointing to the role of Brittany as the transmitter of Celtic matter into the European world.⁹⁶ But whether the common traditions that make up the Beheading romances are indigenous to the area, or whether they came from Continental versions is irrelevant to our purposes. There was such a body of material, and the Gawain poet, like the author of The Turk and The

Carl, made use of it.

It is clear, then, that the Gawain poet, by his use of traditions, his technique and his narrative devices, is closely related to the mainstream of Northern romance writing. But what of the sens of his work; to what extent does it reflect the feudal values of the North?

One aspect of these feudal values is the presentation of Arthur. We have seen that the ambivalent attitude towards Arthur in Northern romance was a reflection of the ambivalent attitude towards the monarchy on the part of the magnates of the North. Thus, in the Gawain romances there is often a balance between Arthur the king and Gawain the representative of baronial freedom. Is this balance present in Gawain and the Green Knight?

Schnyder believes that Arthur is a willful tyrant and that Gawain is in opposition to him,⁹⁷ but this viewpoint is difficult to accept. It is true that the poet criticizes the King: he is "childgeared," and his refusal to eat until he has an adventure is perhaps willful. Certainly, he is rash to take up the Green Knight's challenge. But he is not tyrannical in any of the ways usually associated with him in Northern romance. He cannot be blamed for imperial ambitions, or for depriving heirs of their rights or for seizing land. The Arthur of Gawain differs considerably from the Arthurs of other Northern works. In contrast to Golagros or The Awntyrs, where Arthur is educated by his experiences, the focus in this romance is on the education of Gawain.

In this respect, then, the romance is not like some of the other Gawain poems. But we must bear in mind that Arthur is by no means treated badly in all of the more purely Northern works.

Although Gawain and the Green Knight may not share the attitude towards the legendary British king that the other Northern works present, it does share their attitude towards the King's opponents. It too has the image of the noble adversary, a theme we have noted throughout Northern Arthurian and non-Arthurian romance.

All too much of the work on Bercilak is on his role as the Green Knight, the shape shifter and the decapitated host who has hints of the devil and of evil spirits about him.⁹⁸ While the traditions behind this side of him are of interest to the folklorist, we must not lose sight of his more mundane role as a provincial baron. Golagros, Galeron, even the Carl, are examples of the esteem accorded independent barons in Northern romance, but Bercilak is perhaps the most complete and vivid portrayal we possess of a Northern magnate.

Critical opinions may differ about Bercilak's role in the romance. Benson, for example, thinks him to be something of a villain,⁹⁹ yet it is clear that he is at least as noble as anyone in the romance. Bercilak is wealthy, powerful, and fiercely independent. He is perhaps a bit provincial, but nevertheless a model of courtesy. Although remote from Arthur's court, he is fully au courant with the latest traditions in chivalry; his castle, for example, is of the most fashionable kind.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, it is clear that Arthur's court, though perhaps the center of courtesy, has by no means a monopoly on the virtue. The outlanders know just as well, if not better, how to behave towards a guest. While it is true that their guest has a different appearance from Arthur's, their treatment of Gawain, even before they learn his identity is in marked contrast to the treatment afforded Bercilak in the royal court.¹⁰¹ Perhaps Bercilak's retinue do get some of their notions of courtesy out of romance books, but their virtue is in no way diminished by this. Bercilak may be rough and crude, in language as well as deeds, in his guise of the Green Knight,¹⁰² but in his role of baron he is proof that courtesy is to be found not only in Camelot.

The adversary, then, is noble, but what of the protagonist? How does the Gawain of the romance compare with the Gawain of other Northern works?

In the purest and most aristocratic of the Northern romances Gawain's most salient virtue is his valor, where it is as much a part of his general excellence as his courtesy. But while his bravery is put to the test in Gawain and the Green Knight, his prowess is not. Some critics believe that Gawain is in fact more of a courtier than a warrior and that he has more in common with Chaucer's Squire than with Chaucer's Knight. Benson considers him to be related to the Lover in the Roman de la Rose, not to a hero of chivalric romance.¹⁰³

The weakness of this view is that it ignores the essential ability of the Gawain poet to leave out the irrelevant. His hero fights

with all manner of creatures in his travelling,¹⁰⁴ but a more detailed description would disrupt the unity. Certainly the fierce joy with which Gawain takes up his arms after being nicked by the Green Knight is proof that he is no stranger to combat:

He sprit forþ spenne-fote more þen a spere lenþe,
 Hent heterly his helme, and on his hed cast,
 Schot wiþ his shuldere; his fayre schelde under,
 Brayde; out a brygt sworde and bremely he speke;
 Neuer syn þat he wat; burne borne of his moder
 Wat; he neuer in þis worlde wy;e half so blythe-
(vss. 2316-2321)

We must remember that the romance is not one of the battlefield, and the virtues it celebrates are not martial. Not only do we have no image of Gawain's valor, but a chief virtue in the other romances, mercy, is also omitted since it is exercised in battle, not in games. The Gawain poet does not ignore the valor of his hero, but he puts it in the background of his work, not, as in the other Northern works, in the foreground.

In the Northern romances, as in Chr tien, Gawain represents the standard of chivalry against which all other knights are tested. Golagros, for example, has his courtesy and his valor enhanced by the degree to which he approaches Gawain. But, because Gawain is the ideal within the court, he becomes the representative of the court. That is, the reputation of the court is reflected in his performance. Thus, in The Turk, Gawain is the knight chosen to be a party to the Beheading Game, and he is the representative of the court in the single combats of The Avowyng, The Awntyrs, and Golagros.

In Gawain and the Green Knight it is clear his virtue is being tested, not because he is the least worthy of Arthur's knights, as he says he is, but because he is the most. What is at stake, furthermore, is not only Gawain's life and honor but also the reputation of the court.¹⁰⁵ The romance, therefore, closely follows the Northern tradition in making Gawain the active representative of the court. In the continental romances Gawain is either a passive keeper of chivalric standards, as in Chretien, or he is an active but scarcely impeccable hero as in the Grail romances.

Gawain, then, is the epitome of chivalric virtue in the romance, but what is the nature of this virtue? It is based, as in other romances, on courtesy and trouthe. However, in such a complex work these virtues have no simple meanings, and there is little agreement about their connotations. But, just as the other elements of the story emerge from the general background of Northern romance, so does the Gawain poet's conception of trouthe and courtesy relate to the narrowly feudal definitions of these terms¹⁰⁶ in Northern history and literature, although he transforms them into something very much his own.

Since the poem began to be seriously studied there has been general agreement that the temptation of Gawain is not a test of his chastity but of his trouthe.¹⁰⁷ However, trouthe here differs in meaning from the other acts of trouthe in the romance. Gawain's compacts with Bercilak test his word, his readiness to live up to a

bargain, whether it be to find the Green Chapel, to exchange winnings, or to receive a return blow. His failure here is slight and so is his punishment. The far more serious test that he successfully passes is not based on his word, for he never promised not to make love to the Lady.¹⁰⁸ Yet, had he done so, he would have lost his head, for he would have violated the most sacred part of the feudal code: the allegiance owed to a host by his guest.¹⁰⁹ When Gawain is most closely pressed by the Lady he fears most "3if he schulde make synne/ And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t" (vss. 1772-74).

Trouthe pervades the entire romance, often appearing in the symbols of the pentangle and the girdle, and its meaning is far more complex than simply the chivalric virtue. But the fact remains that the most serious test that Gawain undergoes, and the one that reflects the most glory upon him, is a test involving a feudal relationship. However lacking in "lawte" he ultimately is, the compact that he breaks is the lightest imaginable: one jestingly arrived at in a Christmas game.

But it is clear that Gawain's preeminent virtue, the one that demonstrates most his excellence, because it is the most difficult, is his unspoken loyalty towards his host. But in feudalism the relationship between host and guest is essentially that between lord and vassal. Although Gawain fails his pledged word he keeps his unspoken feudal commitment and, in the opinion of Bercilak: "As perle bi þe quite pese is of pryse more, / So is Gawayn in god fayþ bi other gay

knyztes'' (vss. 2364-65).

Gawain thus has lived up to the highest expectations of chivalry. But we must note that what the Gawain poet considers to be this supreme virtue is not loyalty to a king, nor to the Church, nor to a lady, but personal loyalty between vassal and lord, the most central virtue of the old feudalism. The poet's conception of trouthe is extremely complex in the romance, but at its root is the essentially feudal conception of the term.

If the theme of trouthe pervades the entire romance, then the theme of courtesy is the key to Gawain's character. For in no other Arthurian romance is he so frequently referred to as courteous,¹¹⁰ But, before we consider his courteous behavior in Gawain and the Green Knight, let us review his courtesy in other romances.

As we have seen, the courtesy associated with Gawain in Continental romance is neither a specifically Christian virtue, nor a necessary element of courtly love, but is rather the natural outgrowth of the needs of a feudal society. We have so far seen in Northern romances that Gawain's courtesy is primarily of this older type based primarily on deference and measure, not on love of God or of lady. Deference is what marks his relationship to his lord, Arthur; to enemies, like Golagros, Menealfe and Galeron; to strangers, like Spinagros, and the Turk; to social inferiors, like the Carl and the Hag; and, disinterestedly, to ladies like Guenevere or the maiden of The Avowyngge.

This conception of courtesy is found also in the non-Arthurian Northern romances that we have examined. Thus, in The Bruce, Aymer de Valence and the Bruce himself are singled out for their treatment of enemies, while the latter always treats his subjects with respect. In Rauf Coilgear, Roland's behavior approximates Gawain's, and the collier as well as the king learns the importance of restraint and deference.

The central issue for us is how the courtesy of Gawain in Gawain and the Green Knight relates to the more primitive, or perhaps more feudally oriented, conception of courtesy. Also to be determined is the extent to which the Gawain poet's conception of the virtue derives from essentially Christian or fine amour sources, for most of the critics have stressed these last two aspects.

Part of the problem is that critics have until recently taken too unquestioningly the connection between Gawain's courtesy and his amorousness,¹¹¹ and thus they have, perhaps along with the Lady and Bercilak's retainers, been beguiled into believing that, if Gawain is courteous, he must be an accomplished seducer of ladies. It may be, as Benson suggests, that there is the element of the promiscuous Gawain of the Continental verse romances, but we must not forget that this viewpoint is not shared by the author.

There are two identifications of the connection between the Gawain of this romance and the Gawain of French verse romances. The first is found in the remark of Bercilak's men when they learn of the

identity of their guest:

"In menyng of manereȝ mere
 Øis burne now schal vus bryng,
 I hope that may hym here
 Schal lerne of luf-talkyng."
 (vss. 924-927)

The second connection is when the Lady tells Gawain that she wonders if he really is Gawain because:

"So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden
 And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselfen,
 Couþ not lyȝtly haf lenged so long with a lady,
 Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his cortaysye,
 Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum taleȝ ende."
 (vss. 1297-1301)

The motif is common in French romance. However, some critics are aware that the Lady is rather bookish in her approach to love, and that her conception of Gawain is far from the truth. As Brewer points out, the Lady is attempting "to fasten on the promiscuous sexuality of the Gawain of late French romances."¹¹²

Brewer also ingeniously explains away the meaning of "luf-talkyng." He interprets it to mean talk about love, rather than talk of love, and is thus pleasant, harmless talk, rather than the prelude to seduction.¹¹³ But even if the phrase were not so innocent, is it not possible that Bercilak's knights are making the same mistake about Gawain that the Lady makes? Burrow points out that they distort the conception of courtesy into a purely social virtue,¹¹⁴ but perhaps they lack the understanding of their lord. Perhaps the fine irony of the Gawain poet is at work here. The lesser characters of the romance

see only the light, festive, and amorous side of courtesy, whereas in fact Gawain's courtesy is a great deal more serious. Amorousness, like chastity, is essentially irrelevant to the author's themes of loyalty, humility, and deference.

Recent critics have been taking the viewpoint that in Gawain and the Green Knight courtesy and courtly love are two entirely different phenomena. Kiteley points out that "the poet is making an implied criticism of that courtesy which was the outcome of courtly love."¹¹⁵ Heiserman suggests that the poet's great ability lay in his redefinition of courtesy to exclude adulterous courtly love.¹¹⁶ But this is not so much a redefinition as it is a return to the earlier conception of courtesy as it appears, for example in the Chanson de Roland. As Brewer points out, Gawain's courtesy is essentially that of the Gawain of the earliest stories.¹¹⁷ One might add that it is also the courtesy of the Gawain of Northern romance.

What then is courtesy for the Gawain poet? Some critics believe it to be primarily a Christian virtue,¹¹⁸ but perhaps they are applying too literally its appearance in the poet's religious works. For Brewer, it is "an ideal of personal integrity, but its quality can only be realized in benevolent actions or at least speech towards other people. . . courtesy consists in loving God and one's neighbor as oneself. The three persons, God, neighbor, and self are for the poet indissolubly linked."¹¹⁹

It is evident that the root of this concept is the feudal virtue

most closely connected with Gawain. The basic concepts of measure, deference or consideration, and humility are all presented in Gawain's first speech in the romance when he asks to be allowed to take over the adventure.¹²⁰ And yet there is nothing in his speech that would surprise an audience familiar with Golagros, The Awntyrs, or the rest of the corpus of Northern Gawain romance.

Brewer sees a parallel to the Gawain of Gawain and the Green Knight in the Gawain of the Alliterative Morte, but he accepts too uncritically the Whiting thesis and thinks that it simply represents the first stage of the Arthurian story, the chronicle. In point of fact, the Gawain of the chronicles rarely is courteous and it will be made clear in the next chapter that his presentation and his preeminence in the Morte is akin to his position in other Northern works. Brewer states that "the poem, without love, is not without courtesy,"¹²¹ but in fact the same could be said about any Gawain romance of the Northern romance tradition.

The Gawain poet refines the prevailing concept of courtesy and makes it far more complex than the simpler battlefield and hospitality virtue of the other romances, but in its avoidance of both courtly love and mysticism it remains essentially Northern in sensibility.

If we accept this definition of the courtesy of Gawain in the romance, then his diatribe against women is not discourteous.¹²² His actions cannot be faulted, for he does not act, nor can his speech be considered discourteous to Bercilak since he blames women in general

terms and says nothing against the Lady or Morgan le Fay. His courtesy is based on consideration for women, not on their worship, and his statement, however insulting to fine amour, does nothing to suggest that he will not continue to defer to ladies.

Just as with trouthe, then, the Gawain poet develops his own highly complex conception of the virtue and imbues it with Christian significance. But the center of the virtue, consideration for others, and deference even to those who are weaker, and mesure, hearkens back to the values of the chansons and the first feudal age. At the same time this more archaic treatment reflects the society of the Northern feudal revival.

We are now in a position to ascertain the relationship of Gawain and the Green Knight to Northern romance and to Northern society. It is clear that the Gawain poet does not focus on chivalric virtue, nor on the problems brought on by feudalism. Those themes of the work which make it so respected, self-knowledge, man's imperfectability, and others, are the work of the poet's genius, not of the uniqueness of his society.

His choice of subject, however, is surely the result of his Northern background, for only in the North does Arthurian literature have any vitality in fourteenth century England and only in the North is Gawain the pre-eminent character of Arthurian romance. The background also appears in his sense of local topography and his splendid portrayal of a provincial court. Furthermore, his unique conceptions

of trouthe and courtesy are ultimately rooted in the operation of these virtues within Northern feudalism and thus are parallel to their appearance in other Northern works. Most importantly, the poet envisions as the highest form of earthly activity, not the crusader, the Grail-quester, or the lover, but the knight-errant, an image hopelessly out of date in any other part of England. His romance, at the same time that it is his own, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the feudal traditions of the North.

The Gawain romances are at the core of the chivalric literature of the North during the feudal renaissance of the fourteenth century, and they illuminate the nature of that revival. They reflect the values of the North and combine the features that we have noted about other Northern romances: uniqueness, unity, and variety.

Their distinctiveness is demonstrated by their treatment of Gawain, for this is the only section of England where Gawain becomes the central hero of romance. Their unity is seen in their portrayal of Gawain; in all of the romances he is the ideal of chivalry, the symbol of all that is good in the Arthurian world and hence the symbol of chivalric values in general. But within this unified approach there is sufficient variety in the presentation of Gawain to reflect the different centers of poetry that must have developed in an area where several powerful magnates maintained their own courts. Thus, the Gawain poet, while writing in an essentially Northern milieu, can present an entirely different picture of the relationship between Gawain and Arthur

than is presented in Golagros and Gawain.

Since Gawain serves as the standard of chivalry, the kind of chivalry that he represents is that which was most admired in the North and which represents the Northern ideal. As we have noted, this chivalry is basically a throwback to an earlier type in which the emphasis is not on piety or courtliness or national loyalty, but rather on consideration for others, mercy towards one's enemies, and loyalty to one's lord.

This "olde curteisye" is the product of a historical condition where feudalism is still alive and vital. Chivalry incorporates the ideals necessary to hold a society together and differs considerably from the chivalry celebrated in other parts of England. There, the "Indian summer" of chivalry concentrated on semblance rather than reality, on love rather than the virtues of the battlefield and the council hall.¹²³ This chivalry was a game because it was a code of conduct no longer meaningful in the operation of society, while the ideals of the Gawain romances were the virtues by which the Northern magnates lived and died. With the exception of the Percy's demesure, there is little in the treatment of the Northern conception of Gawain that could not be reasonably applied to the character of Hotspur.

An age where Gawain had become either a figure of the remote past, or a representative of virtues no longer considered supreme, and in some cases looked upon as disruptive, was also an age when feudalism as a viable force ceased to function. Yet, as we have seen,

feudalism did not die in the North, but was reborn through the combination of the revival of Anglo-Scottish hostilities and the historical distinctiveness of the region. Contemporary with this rebirth is the era of the Gawain romances which reflect most clearly the values of that society.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 R. S. Loomis, "Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulainn," PMLA, xlii (1928), 384.
- 2 Rachel Bromwich, "Scotland and the Arthurian Tradition," B. B. S. I. A., xv (1963), 89-90.
- 3 R. S. Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chretien de Troyes (New York, 1949), p. 153.
- 4 R. S. Loomis, The Grail, From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol (New York, 1963), pp. 10ff.
- 5 E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London, 1927), p. 151.
- 6 R. M. Fletcher, The Arthurian Material of the Chronicles (Boston, 1906), p. 139; Margaret Houck, Sources of the "Roman de Brut" of Wace (Berkeley, 1941), p. 164.
- 7 Fletcher, loc. cit.; Charles Foulon, "Le Role de Gauvain dans Erec et Enide," Annales de Bretagne, lxv (1958), 156. Note especially Gawain's praise of peace, vss. 10, 768-777, Roman de Brut, ed. Ivor Arnold (Paris, 1930).
- 8 See Layamon's Brut, ed. Frederic Madden, 3 vols. (London, 1847), vs. 25, 487.
- 9 B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Med. St., ix (1947), 195.
- 10 The Grail..., loc. cit.
- 11 Jean Frappier, "Chretien de Troyes," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), hereafter referred to as ALMA, pp. 161 ff.
- 12 William A. Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes," MP, L (1952-53), 223-224.
- 13 K. G. T. Webster, introduction to Lanzelot, Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, trans. K. G. T. Webster (New York, 1961).

- 14 "Gawain...", pp. 197, 203, 224.
- 15 D. S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet," Chaucer and His Contemporaries, ed. Helaine Newstead (New York, 1968), p. 336. Originally appeared in Patterns of Love and Courtesy, ed. John Lawlor (London, 1966).
- 16 Charles Foulon, "Le Role du Gauvain...", pp. 154-155.
- 17 I use the Middle English term here, and throughout this study because, for the Middle English romancers, trouthe was central to their conception of Gawain. Although the nature of the virtue can vary from romance to romance, its common meaning is clear. It represents that quality of fidelity and trust and, above all, loyalty to one's lord upon which the structure of feudalism rested. Because of the frequent absence of this critical virtue, feudalism, even at its height, remained fundamentally unworkable. Nevertheless, trouthe, as the core of feudalism, was, next to valor, the major virtue of Northern English chivalry. For a discussion of the role of loyalty in feudalism see Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), pp. 231-238. For loyalty as a chivalric virtue see Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Baltimore, 1940), p. 30.
- 18 Jean Frappier, "Chrétien de Troyes," ALMA, pp. 188-189.
- 19 I am indebted to Professor Theodore Silverstein who pointed out this common structure to Chrétien's romances in a lecture at the City University of New York in January, 1964.
- 20 The Squire's Tale, vs. 95, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
- 21 Whiting, "Gawain...", p. 215.
- 22 Jean Frappier, "Le Personnage de Gauvain dans le Premier Continuation de Perceval," RP, xi (1958), 344.
- 23 Otto Springer, "Wolfram's Parzival," ALMA, pp. 241, 244-245; Helen M. Mustard and C. E. Passage, introduction to Parzival, trans. Helen M. Mustard and C. E. Passage (New York, 1961), p. ix.
- 24 Fanni Bogdanow, "The Character of Gauvain in the Thirteenth Century Prose Romances," MAE, xxvii (1958), 154-155.

- 25 Whiting, "Gawain. . .," p. 206; Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle," ALMA, pp. 304-305.
- 26 Jean Frappier, Etude sur "La Mort le Roi Artu" (Paris, 1936), pp. 278-280.
- 27 For this explanation of Gawain's decline in the Vulgate cycle I am indebted to the suggestions of Professor Helaine Newstead.
- 28 Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain," p. 222.
- 29 J. D. Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, 2 vols. (Goetingen, 1923), i, 208-282; Alexandre Micha, "Miscellaneous French Romances in Verse," ALMA, pp. 358-392.
- 30 Frederick Whitehead, R. S. Loomis, "The Livre d'Artus," ALMA, pp. 336-338.
- 31 Le Roman de la Rose, ed. E. Langlois, 5 vols. (Paris, 1920-24), vss. 18, 697-18, 700.
- 32 William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley, 1960), p. 397.
- 33 Ed. Bishop Stubbs, 2 vols. (London, 1887-89), ii, 342.
- 34 R. W. Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," ALMA, p. 493.
- 35 The dates and provenance of the romances discussed are as follows: The Jeaste of Sir Gawain, South Midlands, c. 1450; Golagros and Gawain, Middle Scots, 1475; The Awntyrs of Arthur at the Tarn Wadling, Northern, c. 1400; The Avowyng of Arthur Sir Gawain, Sir Kay and Sir Baldwyn of Britain, Northern, 1425; Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, originally Northern, c. 1400; The Weddyng of Sir Gawain, East Midlands, originally Northern?, 1450, originally 1375?; The Turk and Gawain, Northwest Midlands, c. 1500; Gawain and the Green Knight, Northwest Midlands, c. 1375.
- 36 George Kane, Middle English Literature (London, 1951), p. 54. Gawain's reputation also suffers in The Turk, but this work is scarcely a polished literary composition; see below.

- 37 R. W. Bennett, "The Sources of The Jeaste of Sir Gawain," *JEGP*, xxxiii (1934), 61-62.
- 38 Ed. Sir Frederic Madden, Sir Gawain (London, 1839), hereafter referred to as Madden's Edition. All quotations taken from this edition.
- 39 "English Rimed and Prose Romances," p. 500.
- 40 Kane, loc. cit.
- 41 William C. Calin, The Old French Epic of Revolt (Paris, 1962), p. 102.
- 42 The precise version of the First Continuation that the Golagros poet used has been identified by Paul J. Ketrick, The Relation of "Golagros and Gawain" to the Old French "Perceval" (Washington, 1931).
- 43 W. R. J. Barron, "Golagros and Gawain: A Scot's Conception of Love and Honour," *B. B. S. I. A.*, xv (1963), 132. Professor Barron suggests that the work demonstrates "a specifically Scottish conception of romance," but, as we have observed, there is little difference in the romance conceptions of the works composed on either side of the border.
- 44 The Tragedy of Arthur, p. 166.
- 45 M. M. Gray, introduction to Lancelot of the Laik, ed. M. M. Gray, *S. T. S.*, o. s., ii (Edinburgh, 1912), p. xiv.
- 46 Madden's Edition. All quotations are taken from this edition.
- 47 Cf. Herod's raging in the Coventry The Magi, Herod and the Slaughter of the Innocents, The Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas, ed. J. Q. Adams (Cambridge, Mass., 1924). vss. 776-817.
- 48 Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain. . .," suggests that Gawain's role in Chretien is to swing the action to its proper course, but in none of these romances is Gawain the central actor.
- 49 Ketrick, The Relation of "Golagros and Gawain," pp. 108-116.

- 50 The Continuations of the Old French "Perceval" of Chretien de Troyes, i. ed. William Roach (Philadelphia, 1949), vss. 11, 959-12, 490.
- 51 Barron, "A Scot's Conception," p. 131.
- 52 J. P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English (Manchester, 1930), ii, 88.
- 53 Judging by the number of MSS., it was the most popular of the British Gawain romances. H. G. Leach, "The Awntyrs of Arthur at the Tarn Wadling," B. B. S. I. A., xv (1963), 145.
- 54 Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur, p. 162. Matthews is certainly correct in perceiving the theme of opposition between Gawain and Arthur in Northern romance, but he overstates his case, as I attempt to point out.
- 55 J. R. Hulbert, "The West Midlands of the Romances," MP, xxviii (1926), p. 10; F. J. Snell, King Arthur's Country (London, 1926), pp. 196-199. For a description of the area in modern times see G. H. Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets (Boston, 1907), pp. 203-204.
- 56 J. L. N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," ALMA, p. 526.
- 57 Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur, p. 169.
- 58 Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," Med. St., xxvii (1965), pp. 96-116.
- 59 Ed. Joseph Ritson, Three Early English Metrical Romances (London, 1842). All quotations from this edition.
- 60 E. A. Greenlaw, "The Vows of Baldwin," PMLA, xiv (1906), 607.
- 61 Theodore Silverstein, "The Wife of Bath and the Rhetoric of Enchantment," MP, 1viii (1961), 162-164.
- 62 Laura Sumner, introduction to The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, ed. Laura Sumner, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages, vol. V, no. 4 (Northampton, Mass., 1924), xxii-xxv.

- 63 William Matthews, The Ill-Framed Knight (Berkeley, 1966), p.102.
- 64 Silverstein, loc. cit.; Sigmund Eisner, A Tale of Wonder (Wexford, Ireland, 1957), p. 90.
- 65 "English Rimed and Prose Romances," p. 504.
- 66 Sumner's edition. All quotations taken from this edition.
- 67 "Gawain...", p. 229.
- 68 Eisner, A Tale of Wonder, pp. 121-134.
- 69 Cf. G. L. Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge, Mass., 1916).
- 70 Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," p. 495.
- 71 Auvo Kurvinen, "Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle" in Two Versions (Helsinki, 1951), pp. 65-79.
- 72 Ibid., p. 96.
- 73 Phyllis Hodgson, "The Franklin's Tale" (London, 1960), 78-79.
- 74 Kurvinen, op. cit., pp. 103-105.
- 75 Ibid., p. 51.
- 76 Ibid., p. 89; K. G. T. Webster, "Galloway and the Romances," MLN, 1v (1940), 364; G. H. Maynadier, "The Wife of Fath's Tale": Its Sources and Analogues (London, 1901), p. 153; John Speirs, Medieval Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London, 1957), 201-208.
- 77 Kurvinen, p. 106. But Kittredge does not believe that the romance belongs to the Imperious Host theme, op. cit., pp. 92-95.
- 78 Kittredge, pp. 132ff.
- 79 "Arthur and Charlemagne," Englische Studien, xxxvi (1906), 360.

- 80 For a survey of the traditions incorporated into the Pelerinage see R.N. Walpole, "The Pelerinage of Charlemagne, Poem, Legend, and Problems," RP, viii (1955), 184-186.
- 81 Ed. J.W. Hale, F.J. Furnivall, Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript, 3 vols. (London, 1867-68), I, 86-102.
- 82 Introduction to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (Oxford, 1930), pp. xxii-xxiv.
- 83 The Gawain Poet (Chapel Hill, 1956), pp. 206-213.
- 84 Elizabeth Salter, "The Alliterative Revival," MP, 1xiv (1968), 235-237; J.P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English (Manchester, 1930), i, 257-261.
- 85 James Tait, "Political History," Victoria History of the County of Lancaster, 3 vols. (London, 1906-1914), iii, 397-415.
- 86 Oakden, op. cit., ii, 38-39, 95.
- 87 A Stylistic and Metrical Study of "Gawain and the Green Knight" (New Haven, 1962), pp. 70, 133.
- 88 Mary Serjeantson, introduction to Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Israel Gollancz, rev. Mary Serjeantson and Mabel Day, EETS, o. s., 210 (London, 1940), xx-xxxix.
- 89 Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," ALMA, p. 536.
- 90 Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (New Brunswick, N.J., 1965), p. 163.
- 91 See Oakden's remarks about William of Palerne, Alliterative Poetry, ii, 94.
- 92 Tolkien and Gordon's edition. All quotations are taken from this edition.
- 93 Ibid., notes to vss. 691-735, pp. 93-95.
- 94 Introduction to Gawain and the Green Knight, Medieval Romances,

- ed. R.S. Loomis, L.H. Loomis (New York, 1957), p. 326.
- 95 Else von Schaubert, "Der Englische Ursprung von Syr Gawayn and the Green Knight," Englische Studien, 1vii (1923), 394.
- 96 R.S. Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chretien de Troyes (New York, 1949), pp. 1 ff.
- 97 Hans Schnyder, "Aspects of Kingship in Gawain and the Green Knight," ES, x1 (1959), 289.
- 98 D.B.J. Randall, "Is the Green Knight a Fiend?," SP, 1vii (1960), 479-491.
- 99 Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 59-60.
- 100 Tolkien and Gordon, p. 95.
- 101 Charles Moorman, A Knyght There Was (Lexington, Ky., 1967), pp. 63-66.
- 102 Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 83-84.
- 103 Ibid., p. 108.
- 104 However, the Gawain poet could be merely ironic here. Cf. L.H. Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," ALMA, p. 538.
- 105 J.A. Burrow, A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (New York, 1966), p. 50.
- 106 John Gardner, The Complete Works of the "Gawain" Poet (Chicago, 1965), p. 53.
- 107 Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Romance," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, 1967), p. 57.
- 108 Kittredge, A Study of Gawain..., p. 110.
- 109 Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 1xxii (1957), 584.

- 110 Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation...", p. 234.
- 111 Cf. B.J. Whiting, op. cit.; Larry Benson, Art and Tradition...
- 112 Brewer, "Courtesy in the Gawain Poet," p. 331.
- 113 Ibid., p. 326.
- 114 A Reading of..., p. 63.
- 115 J. F. Kiteley, "The De Arte Honesti Amandi of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, lxxix (1961), 12.
- 116 Arthur Heiserman, "Gawain's Clean Courtesy, or the Task of Telling of True Love," MLQ, xxvii (1966), 457.
- 117 Brewer, op. cit., p. 331
- 118 Cf. Burrow, Benson, Gardner, et. al.
- 119 Brewer, op. cit., p. 335
- 120 A. C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry (London, 1964), p. 40.
- 121 Brewer, op. cit., p. 341.
- 122 George J. Engelhardt, The Predicament of Gawain, " MLQ, xvi (1955), 223.
- 123 A. G. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry (Durham, N. C., 1960), pp. 1 et passim.

CHAPTER SIX:
THE ARTHURIAN ROMANCES

At this point in our study we can begin to perceive some of the unique qualities of Northern romance that derive from the historical situation of the North. These qualities in turn can perhaps advance our understanding of the Northern Arthurian romances, some of which have been the cause of much critical controversy.

Trounce, in his detailed investigation of the tail-rhyme romance of the East Midlands, refers to them as a "school."¹ With some hesitancy, and perhaps for want of a better word, we might apply the same term to the Northern romance writers. That is, as a group, while they differ markedly in conception and execution, they all share a common esthetic outlook and use common themes in their works. This is not to imply the existence of a circle of poets, like that of the Dolce Stil Nuovo, where there was close communication between the artists, for we lack any evidence for this, and features of provenance argue against such a closely knit group. Still, because of the homogeneity of Northern society on either side of the border, and because of the relative isolation of that society from other parts of Britain, it is reasonable to assume that there were common traditions in the literary art that affected the works of all the romancers.

Thus, we can note elements of a common esthetic in the Northern romances already studied. There are strong traditions of poetic form, either in the use of the alliterative lines, as in Golagros and Gawain, or Gawain and the Green Knight, or the use of a heavily alliterated tail-rhyme stanza as in Rauf Coilgear, or the Sege of

Melayne. Within this latter group of romances exists a stanza-linked tail-rhyme form, found only in the North, that is used in the Avowyngge of Arthur and the Awntyrs of Arthur and two romances to be discussed in this chapter.²

Most of the Northern romances are also uncharacteristically local. That is, they do not take place in a conventional featureless landscape, but instead refer specifically to Northern locales and use the setting of the Northern landscape. We have observed the geographical precision of Barbour, and the frequent references to Carlisle and the Tarn Wadling in several of the Gawain romances. We have further noted the intrusion of the Northern background into the supposedly Continental setting of Rauf, the importance of the winter landscape in Gawain and the Green Knight, and the description of the storms on the moors in the Awntyrs of Arthur and Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle.

Furthermore, there is a characteristic attempt at unity in Northern romance. Unlike the discursive southern romances, like William of Palerne,³ the Northern works all strive for a unified plot and frequently improve upon their Continental originals. This structure can take many forms; it can consist of thematic unity, as in The Bruce, or a sort of Aristotelian unity of place and action, as in Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, or the Weddyngge of Sir Gawain. But many times unity is achieved through a device we might term the double plot. A romance will consist of two incidents which are apparently only casually

connected but which in fact treat the same theme and offer two ways of looking at that theme. The clearest example is The Awntyrs, where the ghost of Guenevere's mother indicts the court of Arthur in the first part and the court attempts to reform itself in the second. The pattern is also found in Golagros, where Gawain's courtesy is portrayed on two different levels in the two parts, or in The Avowyngge, where the contrasting qualities of an ideal knight are examined in the two sections. The use of the double plot by the author of Rauf points towards his true sources and, perhaps, the true target of his good-natured burlesque. Finally, the genius of the Gawain poet is revealed in his ability to interweave the two stories of the Beheading Test and the exchange of winnings without sacrificing unity of action, character, and theme.

In addition to common esthetic traditions, the romances studied thus far deal with similar themes. All of them focus on chivalry, not as a romance convention but as a viable and vital force. Their concept of chivalry, based mainly on valor, mercy, and respect for one's enemies differs markedly from the concept of chivalry that treats the ideal knight as a lover or spiritual quester or defender of the Faith, and resembles instead the values of the Chanson de Geste, especially the Epics of Revolt. For example, the tradition of the noble adversary is common to both. In Northern romance this role is played by Aymer de Valence in The Bruce and by Golagros, Galeron and Bercilak in the Gawain romances.

Courtesy consists essentially of consideration for those who

are weaker, fair treatment of a stranger, and mercy to a fallen foe; it can encompass service of women, but it is rarely love-service. There is little evidence in Northern romance for courtesy as a specifically Christian virtue, as a recent critic suggests;⁴ it is rather a necessary quality if society is to work.⁵ The nature of Northern chivalry, then, is akin to what Painter terms "feudal chivalry," and bears scant resemblance to the later chivalry of religion and courtly love.⁶

In addition to the early type of chivalry that appears in Northern romance, we see the intrusion of the political reality of the feudal renaissance in the prevalence of themes of feudalism. Trouthe, for example, is conceived of as primarily a feudal virtue: it is central to the hero's chivalric worth and is essentially defined as the bond between lord and vassal. Vengeance, so much a part of the world of the North, is condemned in The Bruce, but nevertheless is the major motivation of Robert the Bruce and James Douglas.

Concern for baronial independence and feudal rights appears in almost every Northern romance. The right of land possession and inheritance is a large part of The Awntyrs, The Weddyng and The Bruce. Golagros focuses on the right to autonomy. There is frequently a suspicious, although never totally hostile attitude towards the power of the monarchy, a good example of which is The Sege of Melayne, where the weak and grasping Charlemagne is contrasted with the doughty Bishop Turpin.

We have observed that all of these themes are personified in the figure of Gawain: localism, since he is traditionally associated with the North; the older ideals of courtesy and chivalry, of which he is the traditional representative; baronial independence, which he comes to stand for in his relationship with Arthur. There is also a tendency to regard the Arthur of the romances in the same light that the Northern magnates regarded the throne, with hostility at times, but never as vindictively as in the Epics of Revolt.

There is considerable variety in Northern Arthurian romances; their date ranges from the earliest Northern work to the latest, their quality, from the nearly unreadable Lancelot of the Laik to the sublime Alliterative Morte Arthure, and their metrical form from alliteration to the couplets of the Lancelot. Yet they all bear a close relationship to the Northern esthetic and to the Northern themes of chivalry and feudalism. A study of the operation of these forces, and careful attention to the roles played by Gawain and Arthur, will also shed new light on the romances themselves. We shall first examine the romances centered on individual knights and then consider the two versions of the death of Arthur.

Sir Degrevant is rarely classified as an Arthurian romance; its connection with the genre has been described as "purely artificial."¹⁷ It is, rather, a composite romance, that is, an original work composed largely out of the stock motifs of conventional romance. It is its conventional qualities that are intriguing, for Sir Degrevant demonstrates

that the traditions of Northern society that so affected Northern Arthurian romance also shaped the nature of works from other traditions.

The work has but a slight connection with Arthurian romance. We learn that Sir Degrevant is the nephew of Arthur and Perceval and that, "with Persevall and Gawayn for herdy and wyght" (vs. 23),⁸ he is a member of the Round Table. The name Sir Degrevant is a variant of Agravain,⁹ whose only claim to fame is his part in the destruction of the Arthurian world, but evidently, the author chose it because he wanted to write his own story and needed a hero whose name was already known but who was not the subject of any traditional tales that might have interfered with his conception. Here, as in The Taill of Rauf Coilgear, we see evidence for the popularity of the Arthurian tradition in the North. Just as the Scottish work studiously avoids any connection with Arthur because it is a burlesque, the English work seeks to add to its popularity by borrowing, although not making use of, Arthurian tradition. The attempt was apparently successful, since the work received enough circulation for Malory to know about it and to refer to Degrevant the guiltless.¹⁰

Although Sir Degrevant is not an Arthurian romance, it is clearly a part of the Northern poetic traditions. The meter of the poem is Northern; the poet shows mastery of the tail-rhyme tradition and more than a third of the lines in the poem are alliterative.¹¹ The peculiar use of repeating lines to link stanzas is also the distinguishing

feature of The Awntyrs of Arthur, The Avowyng of Arthur, and Sir Percyvelle of Gales, works which also demonstrate considerable originality.¹² While we cannot accept uncritically the claim that this technique of stanza-linking is borrowed from Welsh poetic techniques, the existence of this group of romances shows the strength of the literary traditions of the North.

Besides his debt to the tail-rhyme poets, the author of Sir Degrevant shares the alliterative romancers' love of description. One of the most striking parts of the poem is the description of Meliador's bower, particularly the paintings on the walls. The description was compelling enough to inspire the paintings in the dining room at William Morris' Red House five hundred years later.¹³ The description of the feast served to Degrevant by his lady, especially the list of wines, may be borrowed from the Alliterative Morte Arthure.¹⁴

The romance abounds in Northern localism. Some of its best parts are the battle descriptions,¹⁵ which are not conventional single combats on a broad, featureless plain, but make considerable use of ambushes and forest fighting. The realism of the battle description is such that a well-known scholar attempted to relate the combats between Degrevant's men and the Earl's to the historic battle of Otterburn, and to see in Degrevant a representation of Douglas.¹⁶ The fallacy of this identification lies in the notion that Otterburn was a unique occurrence in the North. In fact, as we have seen, Otterburn was only a special example of incidents that were a part of the everyday life of the Border

regions.¹⁷

Unlike many of the Gawain poems, Sir Degrevant contains no references to specific places, no Carlisle or Tarn Wadling. But the locale is a necessary background to the poem and the topography is precise enough for some critics to guess at a provenance.¹⁸ The landscape, although never in the foreground, is always present and pervades the work.

The plot of Sir Degrevant, however, is scarcely an example of the elements of unity that characterize Northern romance. Although a recent critic has termed the work "unified and compact,"¹⁹ the fact remains that much of the middle of the tale, the three days tournament, the secret meetings of the lovers, and the evil steward are only romance commonplaces.²⁰ Still less effective is the resolution of the plot. The Earl, who has been Sir Degrevant's implacable enemy and who has suffered greatly at his hands, meekly acquiesces to his daughter's resolution and his wife's arguments and gives his permission for the wedding.²¹ Thus the Northern tradition has not influenced the plot and the tale remains quite possibly the least structured of any of the complete romances of the region. But we must not judge the author too harshly, for he was largely using the plot of a non-Northern work, The Earl of Tolouse.²²

Sir Degrevant most significantly demonstrates its connection with the corpus of Northern romance in its reflection of Northern society. It is, perhaps, the most detailed picture of this society that

The wars that follow between the Earl and Sir Degrevant are purely private wars involving considerable numbers of retainers on either side. The dispute is not referred to a higher authority, for the autonomy of these two Northern lords is complete.

Private warfare, knightly honor, property rights and tenants' welfare, these are the main interests of Sir Degrevant until he sees Meliador, the Earl's daughter, and the romance moves into its conventional phase; but even the stereotyped part of the story reflects the atmosphere of the North. Meliador herself is no remote lady to be worshipped from afar, nor does she possess only Criseyde's "slyding corage;" she is, rather, a spirited daughter of a Northern baron and a match for the energetic Sir Degrevant.²⁸ Although she falls in love with the knight the first time she sees him, she remains loyal to her father. At Degrevant's first visit, she is kept from informing on him only by the havoc that he assures her he will wreak on her father's forces. The daunger in this love affair, then, is not the lady's stand-offishness, nor a husband's jealousy,²⁹ but rather the family loyalty held by the daughter of a Northern earl.

Her love is won conventionally by the hero's prowess in a three days' tournament, but her behavior is characteristic neither of French heroines nor of the insipid ladies of Midlands and Southern romance. When Degrevant attempts to claim his lover's rights, she responds:

"Sertes, þo þou were a kyng

þou touchest no swych þing,
 Or þou wed me with a ryng,
 And maryage ful-fylle."¹
 (vss. 1433-1436)

And also "'For-þy syr, hald þe styлле/Whyll þou get my fadyr whylle'"
 (vss. 1449-1450). She resists neither from prudery nor daunger, but
 rather from an acute consciousness of her social position.³⁰ Similarly,
 once she has committed herself to her lover, she transfers all her
 loyalty to him, bringing him a horse in the midst of battle saying "On
 þis stede wol I ryde/ By my lemmanus syde/ In lond whare I go" (vss.
 1318-1320). Her defiance of her father shows the depth of her loyalty:

"Sene he was chosen my fyrst make
 Shal I hym never for-sake,
 What deþe þat I take
 Or dool þat I dye."¹
 (vss. 1749-1752)

This work is perhaps the only romance of love in the main-
 stream of the Northern tradition, and the love-ethos that it reflects is
 touched by the values of Northern society. All Middle English com-
 posite romances, regardless of dialect, reflect notions of legal
 matrimony and avoid the worship of women,³¹ but Sir Degrevant is
 particularly realistic in its portrayal of women of the baronial class,
 while its identification of love with the feudal concept of loyalty, not
 only on the part of the knight but also on the part of the lady, is an
 essentially Northern conception.

Degrevant himself personifies many of the virtues that were
 most admired in the North. We have seen how he represents the

proper feudal lord, but he is also impressive as a knight. What distinguishes him above all is his audacity, whether it be his entry into his enemy's castle, his fearlessness in battle, his quick decision making or even his impulsiveness.³² Yet, such a character, bold, sometimes to the point of recklessness, fiercely proud of his rights, and devoted to his supporters is not unique in the North. In history, we see these traits in Hotspur or almost any of the Douglasses; in literature, we find them in Barbour's James Douglas and in the Alliterative Morte Arthure. There is no evidence that the author of Sir Degrevant was using any of these figures in his portrayal of his hero, but it is clear that the virtues for which Hotspur and Douglas were most celebrated are also the chief virtues of Degrevant.

The most prominent element of Sir Degrevant is its realism. Inhabiting neither the semi-mythical world of some of the Arthurian romances, nor the broader world of the alliterative and stanzic versions of the death of Arthur, it is "the fullest and most successful attempt to place romance in a dramatically realized social setting."³³ We can, perhaps, now understand the author's choice of apparently uncongenial non-Northern material for his work. The more strictly Arthurian romances never lose their aura of legend, however much these romances deal with the issues of Northern society; because of their legendary quality, they cannot reflect the ordinary daily life of the North. But the poet's choice of a purely conventional subject allowed him to freely incorporate within it the material of his everyday

reality. The results were damaging to his structure, but infused his conventional figures with a unique vigor.

Sir Degrevant is thus the most conventional of the Northern romances and superficially the most non-Northern work yet discussed. However, this very conventionality allows the author to create our clearest picture of the baronial society that produced these romances. While he never comes to grips with the issues involved in the great Northern works, loyalty, courtesy and baronial independence, he does depict better than any other poet the audience of the Northern works. Furthermore, the difference between the realistic Sir Degrevant and the other composite romances shows how the Northern traditions could transform conventional material.

Sir Percyvelle of Gales is one of the key romances for the understanding of the development of the Northern school. Because it was, at one time, part of the Auchinleck MS, we can date it with more precision than almost any other Northern work.³⁴ And since it was written in the early part of the fourteenth century, it is the earliest Northern Arthurian work and thus affords us a glimpse of the beginnings of the Northern romance tradition. Perhaps the most obvious result of its age is the fact that, along with Ywain and Gawain, a somewhat later but still early work, it is one of the few knight-errant romances not to use Gawain as a central character.

Of all Middle English romances it has been perhaps the most studied for its sources and the least studied for its literary achievements.

Such literary estimates that have been made of the work vary considerably. R.W. Ackerman, for example, admits that the work needs more critical attention, but he himself finds the meter rough and the diction and tone unrefined.³⁵ Dorothy Everett thinks of the work as "a crude romance," consisting mostly of marvels presented for their own sake.³⁶

Those critics who have appreciated the tale have shown considerable sensitivity to certain aspects of the work, but none of them have examined the poem as a whole. R.S. Loomis points out that Percyvelle is the best of the Arthurian pieces in the Auchinleck MS and that it alone is not the product of a hack.³⁷ He further praises the plot as being superior to that of Chretien's work and is especially appreciative of the humor of the piece. Kane finds virtue in the work's human sympathy and its treatment of the confrontation between innocence and convention.³⁸ Mehl praises the dramatic shifts in point of view and compares Perceval's recklessness to that of Degrevant.³⁹ All of these critics have a point, but none of them seems to discern all the ramifications of the vengeance theme in the romance or its relationship to Northern themes.

In spite of the age of the work it reveals the existence of a Northern poetic tradition at an early date, most distinctively in its meter. As pointed out above, the poem clearly belongs to the same group as the Avowyngge the Awntyrs and Sir Degrevant.⁴⁰ What is particularly revealing is that nearly 100 years separates the Avowyngge

from Sir Percyvelle, a testimony to the tenacity of the poetic conventions of the North as well as to the conservative outlook of Northern poets.

In other respects, however, Sir Percyvelle is less local in its background than the later Northern works. The story takes place, not around Carlisle and the Tarn Wadling, nor in the moors of Rauf, nor the Northern forests of Degrevant, but rather, in the conventional world of romance. The only place ever named is "Maydenlande," a place associated with some of the earliest and most legendary aspects of the tale.⁴¹ Perhaps the poet's inability to depart from convention here is due to the comparatively early date of the work, for a similar, and unique for the North, lack of local color is apparent in the other early Northern work, Ywain and Gawain. It is not until the flourishing of Northern romance later in the century that local references become common.

In its sens, Sir Percyvelle is in many ways the forerunner of Northern romance and foreshadows the same distinctions that exist between later works and their continental originals. For the most outstanding feature of the tale is that it is a Perceval romance without any reference to the Grail quest. A hero who is associated with the Holy Grail in all other versions here shows no signs of any spiritual leanings. This point has been the focus for most of the scholarly work on the poem, and while it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss all the currents of these investigations, their general

conclusions point out many of the Northern elements of the work.

The original view that Percyvelle was indebted to Chrétien is no longer accepted, for the romance preserves many of the features of the original story, the hero's fleetness of foot and his obligation to avenge the death of his father, that do not appear, or at least are muddled, in Chrétien.⁴² Griffith's contention that the poem sprang from a frame tale involving the Red Knight-Witch Uncle theme⁴³ unfortunately depends on stories which considerably post-date the Perceval material and are in many ways influenced by it.⁴⁴ Brown traces the work back to early Irish versions of the Boyhood deeds of Cuchulainn and Finn and sees the cup that the Red Knight stole as "... a cruder form of the grail."⁴⁵ Helaine Newstead finds the origin of the Maydenlande episode ultimately the Sickbed of Cuchulainn and points out that the work corresponds to "the Celtic traditions in important features which have no counterpart in the Blancheflor episode."⁴⁶ Current opinion is summed up by McHugh who believes that essentially "Sir Percyvelle is only the story of young Finn in Arthurian attire."⁴⁷

The amount of research done points out that Sir Percyvelle is a treasure of folk material. Again, as in the Gawain romances studied in the previous chapter, the number of primitive features preserved, and the absence of any immediate continental source have led some scholars to the belief that Percyvelle is an independent composition that retains original insular material and makes use of

direct transmission of themes of North Wales to Northwest England.⁴⁸ But the holders of such a view have a difficult case in face of the overwhelming evidence for Breton development and transmission. It is more likely that the common source of Percyvelle and Chrétien's work is the French Arthurian oral tradition.⁴⁹

We are still left with the question of why Sir Percyvelle, like Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle or The Turk and Gawain, retains so much primitive material in spite of its late date. The answer, as with the Gawain material, lies in the culture of the North, a decidedly conservative one, receptive to archaic stories, whose tastes were closer to those of the audience of the lost Breton romances composed during the first feudal age. A closed society, isolated in large part from the rest of England both culturally and linguistically⁵⁰ would, perhaps, as in the case of Iceland, preserve older material better than the more cosmopolitan parts of Britain.

In its use of older material, Sir Percyvelle anticipates much of the antiquarianism of later Northern romance, as it anticipates its determined avoidance of spiritual elements. But even more premonitory is the poem's theme and structure. The overwhelming sens of the work is not the exposition of the marvellous, nor the education of the innocent, but rather the fulfillment of vengeance, a feudal concept. This same theme lends a structural unity to the work that foreshadows the outstanding characteristic of Northern romance.

Those critics who perceive the theme of vengeance at work⁵¹

examine it principally in terms of Perceval's avenging his father's death. Certainly this is the major theme of the work. The story begins with the marriage of Perceval's parents and the death of his father at the hands of the Red Knight. Perceval, we learn later, is the only man who can avenge his father's death:

His craftes are so ryfe
 ðer is no man apon lyfe
 With swerde spere ne with knyfe
 May stroy him allan,
 Bot if it were Sir Percyvelle son
 Who so wiste where he ware done,
 The bokes says, þat he mon
 'Venge his fader bane.
 (vss. 561-568)⁵²

However, the motif of vengeance is by no means confined to the struggle between Perceval and the Red Knight; rather the poet possesses nearly as fine a sense of the intricacies of the blood feud as the Beowulf poet, or the author of the Njalsaga. For the feud that ensues after the father's death involves all the members of both families. The Red Knight does not confine his enmity to Perceval, but includes the Arthurian household as well. Arthur tells his nephew:

"Sen a þeffe had hym slane
 Abowte a little stryffe
 Sythen haf I ever bene his fo
 For to way hym with wo
 But I might hym never slo."
 (vss. 555-559)

Nor is he the only other member of the family to be so discomfited. Perceval is told later by another uncle that:

"Fiftene gere es it gane
 Syn he my brodre had slane,

Now hadd þe þeeffe undirtane
 To sla us all then. "
 (vss. 921-924)

But, unlike his harassment of Arthur, there is method to the Red Knight's actions:

"He was ferde less my sonnes sold hym slo
 When þay were eldare and mo
 And þat þey solde take hym for þair foo. "
 (vss. 925-927)

And thus the feud passes from generation to generation with a saga-like inevitability. In the absence of any system of wergild, a feud can end only when one family is exterminated, a feat accomplished when Perceval casts the Red Knight's witch mother into the fire. The death of the mother is particularly important because she has the ability to resurrect her son and thus keep the feud alive.

Set against this major pattern of the feud between the families, the author, with his fine sense of structure, introduces a secondary theme of vengeance. In the *Maydenlande* section of the poem Perceval slays a "sowdane," and later, in his battle with the giant, he faces an avenging kinsman who recognizes him:

"Art þou hym þat," sayde he þan,
 ꝥat slew Gollerothirame,
 I had no brothir bot hym ane
 When he was of elde."
 (vss. 2041-44)

The point emphasized by the poet is that the giant is the only surviving member of his family, and thus, with his death, the second feud comes to an end. Having completed his task of countering, as well as

achieving, vengeance, Perceval lives in peace, until like Degrevant, he dies on crusade.⁵³

The central issue of vengeance achieved or prevented is in many ways a pre-chivalric one and lies at the heart of heroic Germanic literature. But in fact vengeance and the blood feud are also at the heart of the Chansons de Geste, particularly the Barons' cycle, which reflects the realities of the day. In Northern history we need look no further afield than the career of Robert the Bruce whose energies were directed as much against his family enemies, the Comyns, as against the English, and whose only heinous acts came in his pursuance of their extinction.⁵⁴ The blood feud in Sir Percyvelle is not a remembrance of Anglo-Saxon times, but a reflection of the motivations of the feudal society of the North.⁵⁵

The theme of vengeance, then, unifies the work, but it is by no means the only unifying device in the romance. A recurrent motif is that of the unintentional act that brings about critically useful results. Perceval's mother takes him into the woods because of her apparent horror of chivalry, but we learn later that if she had not done so, he might have been killed by the Red Knight (vss. 478-480). Perceval trades rings with the sleeping damsel because of his mother's doctrine of mesure (vss. 395-406), but at the end of the romance we learn that the ring he takes has protected him throughout his adventures (vss. 1860-64).

After Perceval has killed the Red Knight he attempts to burn

the armor off, because he does not know how to remove it. But burning the corpse is in fact necessary because otherwise the Red Knight's mother could revive him, as Perceval himself realizes:

Ꝣan wist Percyvall by þat
 It seruede hym of somwhatt
 Ꝣe wylde-fyre þat he gatt
 When þe knyght was slayne.
 (vss. 853-856)

Later, his desire to win back his mother's ring leads to his discovery of her whereabouts and the end of the feud with the Sowdane's family. Yet, this motif of the unintentional beneficial act is an expression of the secondary theme of the work: the triumph of untutored talent over more established conventions.⁵⁶

The only part of the story that does not develop naturally out of what came before is Perceval's series of adventures in Maydenlande, which begin through the conventional romance device of the messenger seeking aid. Otherwise, the ring, the Red Knight and his mother, the search for Perceval's mother and the battle with the giant are all closely, if admittedly mechanically linked. Thus, what at first glance appears to be a mere succession of marvels, is in fact, a tightly knit and unified work presaging the quest for unity of the later Northern romances as well as forecasting in its main themes their reflection of feudal conditions.

The position of Gawain in the romance also prefigures his later role. In this earliest example of Northern romance we see that the poet has taken great pains to assure Gawain his proper respect and

character. Thus, the first knight that Perceval meets is not anonymous, as in Chretien and Wolfram, but "Gawayne þat was meke and mylde/And softe of ansuare" (vss. 291-292). Gawain's characteristic virtue of dealing courteously with strangers is also typically contrasted with Kay's discourtesy. Gawain's courtesy appears again when he speaks softly to the youth at Arthur's court, while his customary closeness to the king is also emphasized; we learn that "he was þe kynges trenchepayne" (vs. 514).

The climactic duel between Gawain and Perceval serves the same purpose as similar duels in Chrétien: the prowess of the hero is established by his ability to equal Gawain. The duel also points up Gawain's traditional mesure; he recognizes his cousin's armor, but is aware that a different man might be wearing it, and thus engages in a restrained battle until Perceval reveals his identity by his foolish speech.

The Gawain of Sir Percyvelle, then, in his reputation for valor, his courtesy towards strangers and inferiors, his mesure, and his closeness to the King gives evidence for the respect accorded the character from the beginning of Northern Arthurian romance. That he appears in essentially the same manner in Golagros and Gawain, written almost 150 years later is a further demonstration of the conservatism of Northern romances. Moreover, since Gawain does represent traditional chivalry, and he is accorded such honor, the poem can scarcely be considered a criticism of chivalric

convention.⁵⁷

Sir Percyvelle of Gales demonstrates the qualities that one might expect to find at the beginning of a poetic tradition. As an early work, its weakest quality is its style; the poet lacks the ability to handle stanza-linking in the smooth manner of his successors.⁵⁸ Furthermore, while the poet has considerable story-telling talent, he is unsophisticated; the seriousness and scope of Gawain and the Green Knight, the Alliterative Morte Arthure, or even Golagros is quite beyond him. The ideals of chivalry, except in the fleeting presentation of Gawain, are of little concern; Perceval never exercises mercy or consideration for others, nor is he ever torn by the often conflicting demands of trouthe. These concepts are absent from the work. Perceval's character, while humorously presented, never develops beyond the rather stock figure of the youthful fool. To claim, as one critic has, a companionship between the well-sketched, dynamic, Degrevant and the stereotyped Perceval is to miss the distinction between realism and convention.

Sir Percyvelle, then, is a crude romance, but it bears a hint of the glories to come. Some of the scenes, like the discovery scene between Perceval and his mother, are moving; the grim irony is occasionally heroic, and the poet's attempt at structure testifies to the continuing concerns of Northern romance writers. In his focus on the blood feud, the poet responds to the situation of his society, perhaps not very well to its ideals, but at least to its reality. The most

commented upon element of the work, the thinness of the layer of courtly convention over the mythological substance,⁵⁹ gives testimony to the remoteness, continuity, and conservatism of the North of England.

The next three romances to be discussed all share the common feature that they are translations of extant continental originals, or of closely related versions of them.⁶⁰ By examining how the poets transformed these works we can appreciate more clearly the effect of the Northern outlook on non-Northern material. Since these works appear near the beginning, at the flowering, and after the end of the Northern school, we can gain some insight into its development.

Ywain and Gawain suffers from uncertainty about its date; the MS derives from the end of the fifteenth century, but almost all indications point to its composition between 1330 and 1350.⁶¹ The work, then, is possibly the second oldest Northern romance and thus sheds additional light on the early growth of the tradition. For, while Ywain and Gwain reflects many early qualities, in the evident influence on it of the ideals of the region it represents an advancement over Sir Percyvelle.

Literary estimates of the poem have been uniformly high. R.S. Loomis judged that "Ywain and Gawain is a better story better told than most of the stories in Gower's Confessio Amantis and than several of the Canterbury tales."⁶² For Pearsall, the poem bears all the marks of carefully contrived professional adaptation,⁶³ while Weston found "no little skill and considerable spirit."⁶⁴ Although most

critics rate the Ywain poet distinctly below the French master, they admit that there is nothing crude about the work.⁶⁵ In fact, a recent critic claims superior unity for the English poet's version.⁶⁶

The work has a number of distinctive features that are the result of its early date. It is one of the few knight-errant romances not to use Gawain as a central character. Ywain and Gawain is also unique in that it is the only Middle English romance that is a translation of a tale of Chrétien de Troyes, and, next to Lancelot of the Laik, it follows its continental source more closely than any other Northern work. However, unlike the latter's author the poet freely adapts his material and makes it into something of his own.

The author's style, in addition to his source, is distinctly non-Northern. The meter is that of the old octosyllabic couplets, the standard form of early romances, and is in no way related to either the stanza-linked tail-rhymes of the Degrevant-Percyvelle group, or to the alliterative school. However, the poet is conversant with the technique of the latter, for he heavily employs alliteration, especially in battle descriptions:⁶⁷

They drow swerdes and swang about
 To dele dyntes had þai no dout,
 They sheldes war shiferd and helms rifen
 Ful stalworth strakes wer þare gifen.
(vss. 3537-3540)⁶⁸

Furthermore, the poet's metrical regularity and his skillful use of enjambement demonstrate typical Northern artistic refinement.

Besides his metrical distinctiveness, the poet presents fewer

localisms than most Northern works. His main concession to Northern geography is his substitution of Cardiff for "Carduel" (Carlisle) that Chrétien had placed in Wales.⁶⁹ It is indeed curious that the poet preferred to drop the reference to Carlisle, which figures so strongly in many Northern romances, to keep the location in Wales; he is apparently ignorant of local tradition. Nor does he modify much else of his original to bring in a local background. The suggestion that he was acquainted with the Mabinogion seems doubtful, although he may have known of a version containing some of the Welsh material.⁷⁰

However limited his debt to the Northern esthetic, the poet certainly responds to the ideals and concerns of Northern society. Where the author of Sir Percyvelle uses some local material and the concept of the blood feud, the author of Ywain and Gawain seems instead to come to grips with the demands of loyalty and the exigencies of the feudal situation.

Much of the critical work on the poem has concentrated on its departures from Chrétien, of which the most apparent is its condensation: the 6800 lines of Chrétien's work are reduced to some 4000 in the English version. In the process, the courtly romance of Chretien has become a rapidly paced story of love and adventure.⁷¹ This condensation has been so exhaustively studied by the most recent editors that it is enough for us to point out that the chief excisions are the fine points of Courtly Love, the self-debates and the elaborate

rhetorical digressions. Although it has been said that the poet "excises the fine points of chivalric behavior,"⁷² what is removed, rather, is the artificial ideals of courtly life. The Ywain poet, like all of his Northern colleagues, is far more interested in the expression of chivalric behavior in action.⁷³ The poet does not merely remove the ungenial aspects of his original; instead, he transforms the work to suit his own purposes.

A clear example of this transformation is the episode where Lundine decides to marry her husband's slayer. In Chrétien, she decides only after an elaborate self-debate which is excised in the English version along with most of the long, Ovidian description of Ywain's falling in love. But the poet does not suppress the passage simply because he is uninterested in Courtly Love; rather, he alters it to deal with the realistic aspects of a common feudal situation; a land that must find a new protector because its lord has been slain in battle. As the Steward tells Alundyne:

"Wemen may maintene no stowre
 Øai most nedes have a governowre.
 Øarfor mi lady most nede
 Be wede hastily for drede."
 (vss. 1221-1224)

A recent critic points out that the union is neither an example of Courtly Love, nor of natural: "...as the English poet's elaborate treatment of the ratification by her barons shows, this is indeed a mariage de convenance dictated by feudal obligations."⁷⁴

This marriage of convenience assumes a feudal obligation

and thus Ywain's breaking of the bond and his abandonment of his lady is not a sin against the laws of Love, but a breaking of the central feudal virtue of trouthe.⁷⁵ The speech of the maiden at Arthur's court clearly points Ywain's treachery:

"He es ateyred for traytere
A fals and liþer losenjoure,
He has bytrayed my lady. "
(vss. 1601-03)

And also: "Till ywain sais sho þuss, 'þou es/Traytur untrew and trowthless'" (vss. 1625-26). By this reasoning, Ywain's adventures in the second part of the romance are not so much to destroy his pride, as in the original,⁷⁶ but rather to re-establish his sense of loyalty.⁷⁷

This is not the poet's only awareness of the feudal realities; one of his few additions to the original is his comment on the division of land that Arthur makes between the two sisters. We are told that his solution becomes the basis for the laws of partible and impartible lands. But in fact the land is not really divided, for the younger sister only holds her property from the older who continues to be the representative of the land and responsible for knight-service. The author thus prefers the earlier method for the division of land among co-heiresses. The later, partible, method was used at a time when wardships and marriages were more important to the lord than taxes and military duty.⁷⁸ As we have seen earlier, the exigencies of border defence made viable again the concept of military duty as the basis for land tenure.⁷⁹

Like the author of Sir Percyvelle, the Ywain poet makes sure to accord special honor to Gawain. The change in the name of the romance by the poet testifies to this; perhaps "...he sought to help the popularity of his work by attaching to it the name of Sir Gawain, an especial favourite of the northern English romances."⁸⁰ His major alteration of the character is to eliminate the reference to the dalliance between Gawain and Lunete, for he was aware that this image of Gawain as a lover was foreign to his audience. In other respects, however, he leaves Gawain as he had found him, for he would have been hard pressed to improve upon Chretien's portrayal of Gawain as a blameless hero.⁸¹ Gawain's function for both is to provide a standard against which the protagonist can be measured. In both versions the climactic point, and the sign of Ywain's regeneration, is his ability to fight Gawain to a draw.⁸² Perhaps the author was so receptive to Chr tien because the French writer presented Gawain in much the same manner as the poet's colleagues did.

Although the characterization of the English poet is expectedly inferior to that of the French master, the poet does present a unified picture of his hero. In the translation from French to English, Ywain moves from a courtly servant who is capable of courtly dialogue, elaborate conceits, and tears to a fighting man with the virtues of Northern chivalry.⁸³ The courtesy that he demonstrates in the second part is in the form that the North most appreciated: consideration for others and aid to those in difficulty. His great fault, like Gawain's in

Gawain and the Green Knight, is his breaking of trouthe. In both cases the trouthe is broken with a character who essentially holds the position of a feudal lord.

The poet thus takes a romance of courtly love and converts it into a tale revolving around the central feudal theme of loyalty. The recent editors have pointed out that "...the poem is clearly the work of a minstrel catering for the sober, realistic audience of a provincial baron's hall."⁸⁴ It is true that this audience was unsympathetic to courtly love or to high-flown chivalric sentiment, but their interests were aristocratic, not "popular," as a recent critic has termed them.⁸⁵ They saw in the story the ideals of their own life and society.

To judge Ywain in comparison to Chrétien is not fair; the work is not necessarily a cruder version of Yvain, for the motivations have been shifted. The process of transformation at work is similar to the process in Golagros and Gawain. Those critics who merely see the latter as excising the courtly love section of the First Continuation,⁸⁶ entirely miss the point and are attempting to judge Northern Middle English romance with the tastes of French courtly romance. In Golagros and Gawain, the poet substitutes the theme of baronial independence and the demands of courtesy for the love and adventure of the First Continuation, just as the Ywain poet substitutes trouthe for marriage as the central subject of the work. Both the Golagros poet and the Ywain poet are altering their originals to fit the ideals and

concerns of their audience. The later poem, however, exhibits a more Northern quality in its use of alliteration and the double plot; perhaps this esthetic had not matured when Ywain and Gawain was composed.

Ywain and Gawain represents a further stage in the development of Northern romance. The poet is not merely interested in a fact of feudal life, the vendetta, but in the central virtue of the feudal system, trouthe. We can also discern a growing sophistication. The poet's source is one of the best of Chretien's romances,⁸⁷ yet the strength of the native traditions enable him to produce a transformation not just a translation of his original.

In many ways the romance represents a middle point in the evolution of Northern romance; it reflects the central values of the North, but does not share much in the Northern esthetic and relies heavily upon Continental material. However, when we see how even an early Northern poet could transform a continental original, we can feel some confidence in the creativity of later Northern romancers.

Lancelot of the Laik is the most recent of the Northern Middle English romances; one might better term it a Scottish work. Its near contemporaries are Golagros and Gawain and The Wallace, but, where Golagros embodies the values of Northern society, Lancelot, like The Wallace, represents the passing of that culture.

Unlike other Northern romances, Lancelot was written by a court poet who was well acquainted with the problems of the Scottish

court.⁸⁸ It is also the only romance, except for Le Morte Arthur, to treat Lancelot at any length.⁸⁹ In spite of its distinctiveness, or rather because of it, it has received less critical praise than any other complete Northern romance. No student of Middle English literature has had anything good to say about the poet's style, and only one critic has found much positive value in the work. Even those who have labored to edit the text have found little to praise.

The common features of Northern romance are altogether missing here. The locale is left as the Vulgate presents it. In his prologue, which is original, the poet describes a garden in his dream vision, but it is the typical locus amoenus and is probably modeled on similar descriptions in Blind Harry's Wallace.⁹⁰ The meter of the work, decasyllabic couplets, has no connection with any of the poetic modes of the North. The poet in fact might have been consciously avoiding these conventions, for, unlike even the non-Northern poets, he eschews heavy alliteration in his battle descriptions.⁹¹ There is no evidence that he was aware of the Northern Gawain traditions, and leaves the character as he found him in the Vulgate. It is true that he interpolates a phrase about Gawain that "of Galowa the knyght goeth to the erde" (vs. 2692), but this connection, rather than being a product of local legend, is one of the earliest recorded statements about him.⁹²

Our judgment of the work's unity is of necessity reserved, since the work is unfinished, but for the most part it merely follows

the discursive qualities of the Prose Lancelot without establishing any order of its own. In fact, the poet adds digressions as well as a lengthy and irrelevant prologue. A recent critic claims that the work is unified by the theme of love and arms,⁹³ but the same theme appears in the source, which the Scottish poet has left unchanged. The work lacks the thematic unity of The Bruce, or the double plot of the Gawain poems, or the economy and focus of Ywain and Gawain or Percyvelle.

Although Lancelot owes nothing to the poetic traditions of the region, some critics see a thematic kinship with other Northern works. They claim a connection between Galehot's demand for homage and similar demands by Arthur on Golagros or on Galeron or on the people of Tuscany. They believe that this demand is related to Scottish fears of English demands for homage.⁹⁴ But such a position is based on a simplistic view of Northern history and literature that makes no distinction between the Scottish court and the Border barons, or between court literature and baronial literature.

It is true that the author expands Arthur's defiance of Galehot:

"For I as yit in timys that are gone
 Held never lond except of God alone.
 Nore never thinkith til erthly lord to yet
 Trybut nor rent als long as I may lef. "
 (vss. 560-563)

But this defiance is not that of Golagros' speech nor of Barbour's encomium on freedom; the political concepts are entirely different. Golagros is a baron, not a monarch, and Barbour is referring to

feudal liberty, not to the rights of a king. Arthur's claim is not that he has feudal rights, but that he holds his land directly from God, a concept in accord with the decidedly old-fashioned political philosophy of the author.⁹⁵

This romance does imply a fear of English designs, a common Scottish fear, but the poet is warning the king about foreign threats;⁹⁶ in the other romances the poets are concerned with threats from the monarchy. The fear of homage in this romance is essentially nationalistic, and thus quite the reverse of concern for the maintenance of feudal independence in the face of a strong monarchy. Although homage is a common theme, in one it is an international problem between strong and weak nations, while in the other it is a domestic problem between a king and his barons.

Lancelot is more specifically political than any other Northern romance, and it has been proved that the poet's major purpose is to criticize the court of James III.⁹⁷ A similar criticism of the king is a part of many Northern romances, especially Golagros, The Awntyrs, and the Alliterative Morte. But the faults attributed to Arthur in these romances are based on his interference with feudal rights: removal of lands, disinheritance, covetousness, and imperial aims. In Lancelot, Arthur is accused of a great many crimes by Amyntas: he has allowed widows and children to suffer oppression, he has failed to listen to the complaints of the people, and has surrounded himself with flatterers and astrologers. The former complaints

are those of barons; the latter are complaints of men of the court whose outlook is national.

Furthermore, the Arthur of Northern poetry is frequently heroic and is usually capable of reform. In contrast, the Arthur of Lancelot is "destitute of noble qualities,"⁹⁸ a condition more in agreement with the Scottish chronicle opinions of Arthur.⁹⁹ Thus the nationalistic Scottish rejection of Arthur triumphs over the typical Northern respect, or at least ambivalence, towards him.

A final proof of the court origin of the poem is its conventional attitude towards courtly love. Lancelot is the only Northern romance that does not in some way attempt to transform the conventional continental concepts of love into something more harmonious with Northern society. What is particularly non-Northern is its worship of women; even in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur Lancelot is not the self-effacing lover of the Vulgate, and, as we have seen, Meliador is no distant lady to be silently worshipped from afar. But in Lancelot Guenevere's imperiousness is unchanged; Lancelot is her devoted servant who will only fight at her bidding. The poet himself is a despairing lover who has been ordered by the God of Love to "...tak one hand an mak/ of love ore armys or of sum othir thing" (vss. 146-147).

Perhaps the romance's greatest value is that it points towards the death of the Northern school, just as Sir Percyvelle points towards its birth. Significantly the dates of these two works fall within thirty years of the beginning and the end of the feudal renaissance of

the North. The tradition did not die before Lancelot, because its near contemporary, Golagros, is fully within the Northern mainstream. But then the power of the Scottish Border barons was laid to rest only at Flodden.

The poem demonstrates that by 1475 the Scottish court was as cut off from feudal traditions as the English court was in Chaucer's day. The literary traditions of the Scottish court of this time owed little to the Northern school and much to the cultivated poetry of the South.¹⁰⁰ Yet a hundred years earlier, while Chaucer parodied already effete chivalric romances, Barbour, a Scottish court poet, wrote one of the great poems of the Northern school.

Lancelot is more purely an Arthurian romance than Sir Degrevant since it is about the most famous character of the Arthurian cycle and is based on one of the key works of the genre. Yet, it owes much less to the Northern Arthurian tradition than does Sir Degrevant, or even Rauf, which seemingly has no connection with Arthurian romance. The poet was either unaware of the rich tradition or he deliberately chose to avoid it. More probably he found it uncongenial and ill-suited to his values as a poet of the court.

The closest Northern romance in date and provenance to Lancelot is The Wallace, which influenced it. Yet the distinctions between The Wallace and The Bruce, discussed in Chapter Three, parallel the distinctions between Lancelot and Northern Arthurian romance: a substitution of national interests for chivalric, a breakdown

in unity and realism, and the use of such non-Northern techniques as aureate diction.¹⁰¹ Both works are a product of a new literature that draws its inspiration from sources other than the chivalric ideals of Northern feudalism.

Le Morte Arthur is one of the treasures of the Northern school of romance, although it has not received much critical attention. Written on the border between the North and Northwest Midlands around the beginning of the fifteenth century,¹⁰² it is a product of the full flowering of the romances of the region. Yet it stands in a unique position to the themes and conventions of the works of the North, and in many ways it deviates more from the mainstream of Northern romance than any other work composed in the period 1375-1425.

Much of the scholarly work on the poem has focused on its relationship to the Vulgate and to Malory. The considerable work at the turn of the century by Sommer and Bruce was marred by their insistence that every variation between versions posited an additional lost source.¹⁰³ To review the acrimonious debate over sources is now happily unnecessary since more recent opinions indicate that the romance is not merely a direct translation of a lost variant of the Vulgate version,¹⁰⁴ but rather an original treatment of the vulgate La Mort le Roi Artus, with additional material added by the poet.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, it is now generally believed that Malory borrowed directly from Le Morte Arthur for his treatment of the death of Arthur and probably also for "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Quenivere."¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately the Stanzaic Morte has never been the center of an extended critical study because it has always been outshone by its admittedly more brilliant alliterative cousin, the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Some critics patronize it. Donaldson, for example, believes that the poet was incapable of recognizing the changes he made in the narrative, while Kane is content to find only humbler virtues in the writer.¹⁰⁷ Against these opinions, however, especially in recent years, is a growing awareness that the romance can easily stand on its own. Pearsall believes that "it embodies all that is best in lyric romance," while the commentator in the revision of Wells finds it "an impressive literary achievement."¹⁰⁸ An early critic also respected the work's "real power," while its best known editor admired its ballad-like quality.¹⁰⁹ What is usually singled out for praise is the poet's story-telling ability and in particular his "attempt to produce a more continuous narrative," or his "ability to produce a well unified and balanced tale."¹¹⁰

The Stanzaic Morte bears a complex relationship to the Northern esthetic tradition. The meter of the poet is partly indebted to conventions. The abababab stanza is apparently the poet's own invention, but his heavy use of alliteration owes much to the Northern tail-rhyme tradition.¹¹¹ Yet the originality of his form does detract from the work's style since the poet is forced to rely on excessively cliched tag endings to fit his demanding rhyme scheme.¹¹² The poet's independence is also evinced in his avoidance of localisms. A few

other Northern works, like Ywain and Gawain, or Sir Percyvelle also lack a sense of local background, but the Stanzaic Morte is the only work written at the flowering of the school to present only the conventional topography of medieval romance.

Not only does Le Morte Arthur deviate from Northern poetic convention, but it also treats Arthurian tradition in a distinctly non-Northern manner. Using the Vulgate tradition as it does, the poem introduces many elements that differ from the Northern view of Arthur and his court. Thus, the final cause for the collapse of the kingdom is not the King's desire for fame and conquest, as in the Alliterative Morte, or as in the prologue to The Awntyrs, but the adultery of Lancelot and Guenevere. Mordred's opportunity for treachery comes about not through Arthur's ambition to be emperor, but through Gawain's insensate desire for revenge. This is the only work of the Northern school where Gawain is not Arthur's chief knight and where he plays a blameworthy part. Perhaps most distinctively, the Stanzaic Morte is the only true Northern Arthurian work to treat of love in any detail and to make it central to its story. Nevertheless, in spite of these deviations, and in spite of the fact that the poet's outstanding single quality is his originality, his conception of the Arthurian tragedy is profoundly shaped by the themes of Northern romance.

We have noted above that the chief praise of Le Morte is for its plot and that the chief virtue of the author is his ability to construct

a story. There is little point in going into all of his changes of the Vulgate version, but all of them have the same effect of unifying and condensing the plot. Yet similar virtues of unity have been seen in every mature Northern romance, and it is in fact a hallmark of the school. In particular, especially among the Gawain romances, we have discerned a recurrent method of achieving unity that, for want of a better term, we called a double plot. There is evidence for a similar pattern at work in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur.

Out of the entire Mort Artu, the poet selects two of the episodes, omitting Arthur's visit to Morgan, the campaign against the Romans, most of the tournaments of the Maid of Escalot section, and the battles with Mordred's sons after the death of Arthur. However, if the author were interested in conventional unity, he might have been satisfied with the Morte section alone, but he prefaces it with the story of the Maid of Astolat and the Poisoned Apple. The poet chose this episode because he intended to use it, not as another chapter in the love story of Lancelot and Guenevere, but to prefigure and illuminate the final Arthurian tragedy.

The relationships established in the first part are carried out in the second and are needed for an understanding of the fall of the realm. Thus, the Maid of Astolat section demonstrates how the love of Lancelot and Guenevere conflicts with the needs of the Round Table. This is seen most strikingly when the Queen desperately searches for a champion, only to be told repeatedly by Lancelot's king that, since

she has driven away from the court the flower of courtesy, they will not defend her.¹¹³ Thus Ector:

"Madame how may thou to us take,
Or how sholde I for the fyght?
Take the now Launcelot du Lake
That euyr has bene thyn owne knyght.
My dere brother for thy sake
I shall hym never se wyth sight.
Cursyde be he that the batalle take
To save thy lyffe agayne the Ryghte."
(vss. 1346-1403)¹¹⁴

The theme of the threat of their love to the Arthurian court is thus sounded, a threat that is to be realized in the second part.

Both sections work on the theme of loyalty and betrayal, but in complementary ways. In the first part no acts of treachery are committed, but false accusations are made to the unhappiness of all. The Queen accuses Lancelot of betrayal, based on the apparently reliable evidence of Gawain; the result is that she is left defenseless. She herself is accused of treachery on seemingly prima facie evidence, and the result is very nearly her own death and the needless sacrifice of Sir Mador, a brave and courteous knight.

But the betrayals of the first part are apparent rather than real, and the ensuing tragedies are in fact averted. In the second part the acts of betrayal, the adultery of the lovers, and Mordred's treachery, although secret, do eventually come to light and cause disaster. The danger that the adultery posed in the first part is now a reality, and the treacherous murder of the Scottish knight is eclipsed by the destruction of the realm.

Along with the theme of betrayal is the theme of vengeance. Sir Mador's brother is killed, and his desire for vengeance nearly wreaks havoc.¹¹⁵ However, there is no lasting harm because Sir Mador accepts the result of the trial by combat and is willing to forgive the death of his brother. But his mesure results in the triumph of justice, for the true murderer is discovered and executed by the State, not by a private act of vengeance.

One has only to contrast the single combat of Lancelot and Mador with those of Lancelot and Gawain to see the difference in tone between the two sections. In the latter, Gawain refuses to accept the verdict of trial by combat, and refuses to let the State settle the matter. In his pursuit of Lancelot he is the implacable obstacle to peace.¹¹⁶ Ironically, Mador, by giving up his vengeance quest achieves it, while Gawain's efforts are ultimately futile and self-destructive as he himself comes to realize. Thus vengeance, which is controlled in the Poisoned Apple episode, becomes at the end the wildly destructive force that causes the collapse of the Arthurian world.

The two sections are thus thematically linked; the measured events of the first part prefigure and prepare for the tragic happenings of the second. Yet the Maid of Astolat section serves another function. The audience of the poet, although perhaps acquainted with the Vulgate version, clearly did not find it the most familiar.¹¹⁷ The first part thus serves as an introduction and a preparation for an audience more accustomed to a different view of Arthur and Gawain.

Of critical importance in determining the relationship between the Stanzaic Morte and the Northern school is its treatment of Gawain. In the preceding chapter we have seen how Gawain, as a representative of the old chivalric virtues, assumed a position of pre-eminence in the literature of the North, but here in the Stanzaic Morte he is clearly second to Lancelot and bears a heavy responsibility for the destruction of the realm. It must be determined, then, if the poet is affected at all by the Northern Gawain tradition.

Certainly Gawain is not absolved of his guilt, yet he occupies his traditional place, for better or worse, as the king's chief support, which is clearly a Northern notion. In at least three separate instances, Gawain is portrayed sitting or standing next to the King giving him counsel. At the end the King becomes little more than an instrument of his vengeance, for he is clearly Gawain's puppet.

The poet does credit Gawain with his traditional virtues of courage, generosity, and friendship. "Hende," the adjective used so frequently by the Gawain poet is applied here as well: "Gawayne answered with myld chere/ As he that ay was hend and fre" (vss. 541-42), or later "[Gawain] was both corteyse and hend" (vs. 623). The Queen herself comments on Gawain: "I wende thou haddist be stable and trewe/ And full of all curtessys" (vss. 1159-1160). But she continues: "but now me thynke thy manners newe/ Thay bene all tourny to vilanye" (1161-1162). She has reason to be bitter since Gawain's false representation that the Maid of Astolat was Lancelot's

mistress is largely responsible for the near tragedy.

Much has been made of the poet's inconsistency regarding Gawain's role with the Maid. The knight begins well; he is a perfect gentleman when he visits her, unlike his role in the Vulgate, and says that he will serve her for the sake of Lancelot. Later, in court, he repeats only what she had told him. But after her death he confesses that he tried to make love to her and she told him only that she loved Lancelot, not that Lancelot loved her. The confusion is hard to explain, but perhaps the author was trying to soften the effect of Gawain's sin.¹¹⁸ One might also conjecture that the audience would have had difficulty accepting a Gawain who was discourteous from the outset of the work.

A similar pattern of gradual degradation occurs in the second part. In the beginning Gawain refuses to betray the love of Lancelot and Guenevere, pointing out that "Yit were it better to hele and layne/ Than werre and wrake thus to begynne" (vss. 1694-95), and later avows ironically, "Launcelot shalle I never betrayne" (vs. 1702). He refuses to be present when Guenevere is put to the fire, for "Gawayne wolde neveyr be-nere besyde/ There any woman shuld be brente" (vss. 1938-39). Yet after the deaths of his brothers he forgets all of his words and leads Arthur to catastrophe.

However, at the end of the work Gawain is regenerated. Our last view of him is in Arthur's vision of him after death, where he is surrounded by the lords and ladies he had defended during his life.

The author is evidently of two minds about the character, and his ambivalence is perhaps the result of a not entirely successful attempt to reconcile the difference in the portrayal of Gawain in his source and the portrayal of the hero in the works of his contemporaries.¹¹⁹

The central hero of the Stanzaic Morte, as in the Vulgate, is Lancelot. But the particular virtues ascribed to him here are to a large extent transferred from the virtues of the typical Northern portrayal of Gawain. His courtesy on the battlefield, his respect for his enemies, his readiness to grant mercy and his fair words are parallel to the qualities of Gawain in Northern romance. Thus, in the battle with Gawain he extends every courtesy to be met only with the latter's sullen defiance. When Arthur is unhorsed, Lancelot remounts him and Arthur sees "how corteise was in hym more/ Than euyr was in any man" (vss. 2200-01).

But, in particular, the battle with Mador is closely patterned after the single combats of Gawain in the Gawain romances. Mador considers his own reputation to be enhanced because he stood up so well to Lancelot and forgives the Queen's treachery for his sake. He is then led into the court, like Menealfe or Galeron or Golagros, and is afterward referred to as a noble knight. This scene does not exist in the original,¹²⁰ but we have seen its model elsewhere in Northern literature. The motif of a hostile but noble knight who is tested by Arthur's chief knight and is then reconciled to the court is a common motif attached to Gawain in early Arthurian literature and in Northern

Arthurian romance. Here then we see the pervasive influence of the Northern traditions; the poet in glorifying his hero, has endowed him with the aspects of the Northern conception of Gawain a process paralleled in the treatment of Roland in Rauf Coilgear.

Besides gaining some of Gawain's traits, the Lancelot of the Stanzaic Morte loses some of the more courtly qualities associated with him in the Vulgate. Thus, in the Vulgate, when Guenevere accuses him of infidelity he meekly sends Bohort to plead for him and later says that if she does not forgive him, "j'ene croi pas que ge peüsse longuement durer"¹²¹ But the English hero is made of sterner stuff, and replies forthrightly to his lady's accusation:

"But by these wordis thinketh me
A way ye wold þat I ware.
Now have good day my lady fre
For sothe thou seest me nevir mare."
(vss. 768-771)

Perhaps this change is due to "Anglo-Saxon common sense,"¹²² but more likely it is due to the Northern traditions that totally reject worship of the lady.

The other major character in the romance, Arthur, occupies a nobler position than in the Vulgate. Except for a passing reference, there is no indication that he is being punished for the incestuous sin that gave birth to Mordred, and the King is left in his glory and splendor.¹²³ He is, rather, the creature of fate, and if he is not so active as Gawain and Lancelot, he remains a focus for the ideals of the poem.

Much has been made of the poet's lack of awareness of Lancelot's sin; he is never condemned for his betrayal of his king. Göller suggests that Lancelot is above mere morality,¹²⁴ but what is more likely is the notion that Lancelot and Guenevere are not guilty so much as they are caught up in the inexorable logic of fate.¹²⁵

For the cause of the tragedy is not so much the adultery as it is its discovery, as Gawain himself tells us: "Many a lande wolde wyth him holde/ Shedde ther shold be mykelle blode/ For thys tale, yiffe it were tolde" (vss. 1707-09). The tragedy, then, develops as a result of the conflicting loyalties that have earlier been established. Thus in the fateful battles between Lancelot and Arthur the former continually bewails his treachery to the latter. Gawain chooses between his loyalty to the well-being of the realm, as well as to his friend Lancelot, and his loyalty to his family. The ties of the first make him willing to forgive the death of Agravain, although "...sore his herte began to colde" (vs. 1915), but he cannot forgive the deaths of Gaheriet and Gaheris.

The poet does point out the sinfulness of the affair, but only at the end, after the tragedy. Adultery is a sin against God, but it is also a sin against man because it is a breaking of trouthe.¹²⁶ But this concept of adultery is not unique to the Stanzaic Morte Arthur poet; we see it as well in Gawain and the Green Knight, while the mixture of loyalty and love is also a part of Ywain and Gawain.

We are now in a position to assess the debt of the author of

Le Morte Arthur to the Northern school. We must conclude that he is perhaps the most original, although certainly not the most brilliant, of the Northern romancers. Of all these works, his is the least realistic and the most legendary; the author deliberately sets a distance between his time and Arthur's. Furthermore, he is inventive in style and plot, astonishingly so in the case of the latter.

However, he is Northern in his sensibility if original in his outlook. His use of alliteration is obviously indebted to the Northern tail-rhyme tradition. He apparently borrows from the Gawain tradition in ennobling his central character, while his concept of courtesy is not being necessarily connected to Courtly Love is a Northern one. The treatment of love as a form of loyalty that does not involve lady worship is purely Northern. More importantly, the central issue of the romance is the conflict between loyalties and the suffering that results. But the theme is pertinent, not only to the themes of other Northern works, but also to the conflicting demands of lord and king that were so much a part of Northern history.

In large measure, the poet's curious position of being both original and traditional is a reflection of the make-up of Northern society. We have already seen that it is an oversimplification to claim that Northern writers were afraid of the monarchy and distrusted imperial expansion. For, at the same time that one can refer to the North as a homogenous provincial society, one must not forget that it was a decentralized area with frequently shifting loyalties. If

the region had had only one court, one could assume a unified attitude among the poets, but the presence of many Northern magnates meant that several literary centers could flourish and that there was room for different points of view, and different, although related, literary conventions. The concerns of the Stanzaic Morte poet, loyalty and courtesy, are the themes of all Northern writers, but the presence of a decentralized polity meant that an audience could exist for his highly original treatment of the fall of Arthur.

The most lasting impression of the work is its elegiac quality, a tone that Malory himself could not improve upon. For example, when Arthur becomes determined to catch the lovers, Gawain weeps "Her now is made a comsement/ That beth not fynysshyd many a yere" (vss. 1726-27); a theme brought up later by Lancelot: "We have be-gonne thys ilke nyght/ That sall brynge many a man full colde" (vss. 1886-87). Perhaps the most striking example is when Lancelot first leaves the court; the knights complain: "'Allas, ' they sayd, 'Launcelot du lake/ That euyvr shuldistor se the quene!'" (vss. 796-97), a summation of the Arthurian tragedy. This same sense of loss and foreboding, so well caught in the Stanzaic work, is a major strength of the Alliterative Morte and survives into the later ballads of the region.

The three translations at the three stages of the development of the Northern school point out the strength of its tradition. Even in a comparatively early work, Ywain and Gawain, the poet is able to

transform Chrétien's courtly romance into a typical Northern Arthurian tale. At a somewhat later time, the Stanzaic Morte poet not only transforms the themes, but alters the structure of his original to fit the pattern of Northern romance. Both works are not examples of the pure Northern esthetic as embodied in the alliterative Gawain romances, since their meter is not exclusively Northern, and they avoid localisms. But their themes of loyalty and betrayal, courtesy and demesure, vengeance and forgiveness are the themes of Northern romance. Yet, in the case of Ywain and Gawain, the original is a work of perhaps the greatest writer of Arthurian romance, and in the case of the Stanzaic Morte the source was the grandest tale of Arthurian literature. That these originals could be so thoroughly assimilated into the Northern outlook is ample testimony to the existence and power of the Northern school.

In contrast, Lancelot of the Laik, written outside the Northern tradition, fails even to reproduce, let alone transform, the prose Lancelot. In fact, the author's purposes, in so far as they were achieved at all, had nothing to do with feudalism and chivalry but were instead directed at contemporary political problems.

The Alliterative Morte Arthure is generally recognized as the masterpiece of alliterative romance next to Gawain and the Green Knight. In recent years it has been the subject of more critical scrutiny than any other Northern work, except Gawain. But, although the author's artistic ability is close to that of the Gawain poet,

his outlook is more purely Northern and provides us with the clearest picture we have of the heroic spirit of the area.

The work was composed at the height of the literary flowering of the North. The traditional date of composition was placed around 1360, but Finlayson has recently argued for a later date, at the turn of the century,¹²⁷ which would fit in better with the development of Northern romance, since the works of the middle of the century were either close translations or crude tales.

The Northern esthetic appears full-blown in this work; the meter is one of the most favored in the Northern school, alliterative, and the one most associated with the rise of provincial literary centers.¹²⁸ In his descriptive abilities, the poet is closely attached to the Northern traditions. As Schofield remarks, "reality is the poet's watchword."¹²⁹ Vivid and realistic description is a hallmark of the Northern school, whether it be the storm in The Awntyrs, the hunting scenes in Gawain and the Green Knight, or the feasts in Sir Degrevant. But the Alliterative Morte poet's descriptive abilities are unsurpassed. Particularly outstanding are his descriptions of battles and feasts. Indeed, for one critic, the poem "becomes a vivid succession of memorable scenes described in the minutest detail and with an eye for the picturesque."¹³⁰

The poet is not as purely local in his topography as the "tarn Wadling" group, in part because much of the venue is continental. Yet his substitution of Carlisle for Caerleon is clearly a

concession to the localism of his audience,¹³¹ as is his reference to Cetterick as a halting place on the journey to the South from Carlisle.¹³² Moreover, for the author, Arthur is a Northern ruler,¹³³ an important concept to keep in mind when considering his portrayal of Arthur. In the scenes on the Continent, the author is less precise in his descriptions, but he still strives for realism. He may have relied upon chronicles of the wars of Edward III for his account, while his description of Arthur's journey into Italy may be based closely upon pilgrims' reports.¹³⁴

In his poetic form and his use of localism, the poet is an orthodox Northern romancer, but more significantly, we see in the work's structure his debt to the Northern tradition. For, although there is much disagreement about the nature of this structure, all critics agree that the work is well unified. Unity, as we have seen, is a feature of Northern romance, even of the longer works like The Bruce, and here the poet's narrative of the rise and fall of Arthur achieves a notable economy quite at variance with his discursive sources.

It is true that this structure is not the typical double plot type, either consecutive or interwoven, but is rather indebted to the genre of tragedy. But unity in Northern poems did not always imply the double plot; romance like Sir Percyvelle, or Ywain are well unified in a different manner. The Alliterative Morte poet creates his own thematically linked structure, but his concern for unity is a part

of his inherited poetic traditions.

When we approach the sens of the poem, we are confronted by an astonishing variety of critical approaches to its theme and its relationship to medieval tragedy. Many medieval works create controversy about their meaning, but in the case of the Alliterative Morte, critics have come to mutually exclusive points of view.¹³⁵ The question is not one of ambiguity, for the poet, all agree, is clear and straightforward.

Much of the argument rages around the nature of the tragedy of the work; that is, is it purely medieval, Aristotelian, or heroic? Matthews believes that the work is a tragedy of fortune, but one that comes about because of Arthur's pride and his desire for conquest. Finlayson agrees that Arthur is punished for his sins, but he considers that his conduct becomes sinful only after the death of the emperor Lucius, where his wars cease to be lawful and become expansionist and unjust. E. F. M. W. Van der ven-ten Bense holds that "the poet has given us a fine picture of his great noble king," who has "pity, toleration, and gentleness." His only flaw that brings about his downfall is his demesure that results in the spilling of innocent blood.¹³⁶

Yet some critics see no sign of Arthur's imperial ambition. Benson argues that the work is a tragedy of fortune, like The Monk's Tale, not because of any sin on the part of Arthur, only that, in his devotion to a worldly ideal, he must inevitably perish. Arthur is not flawed, but his aims are. Loomis sees only fatalism at work; for

him, the tragedy is purely the result of unforeseeable treachery and the whim of Lady Fortuna. For O'Loughlin, Arthur's only hamartia is his incestuous begetting of Mordred.¹³⁷

It is difficult to reconcile these viewpoints. But the poet's attitude towards the wars of expansion and toward the monarchy of his own day is reflected in his treatment of Arthur. We must therefore consider to what extent this attitude is related to the attitudes towards the monarchy in both the history and literature of the North.

Most critics agree that the story involves the rise of Arthur as well as his fall. His early career is certainly exemplary, for he fights for his rights and the rights of others, as in his battle with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount, or his rejection of the Emperor's demand for tribute. Yet, during the war with the Romans, where the poet's sympathies are clearly with Arthur, the British are called rebels time and again by the Romans. Thus, Lucius says "Thoghe a rewme be rebelle, we rekke it bot lyttil! / It es resone and righte the renke be restreynede" (vss. 2040-41).¹³⁸ Arthur, with his Northern associations, at this point in the story is not unlike a Northern baron fighting for his rights against the monarchy; indeed, his being called rebel puts one in mind of Robert or Hotspur. But later, in his campaigns after the death of the Emperor, his role is reversed: Arthur, in seeking the submission of Metz, and later the submission of Italy, is now an imperialistic aggressor.

Thus far it would appear that the Alliterative Morte poet

shares the outlook of the poets of the Epic of Revolt: sympathy with the rebels against the abuse of monarchical authority. This notion would fit in well with a simplistic view that the Northern barons were in perpetual opposition to the monarchy and that Northern society was thus generally against the throne. But, as we have seen, the concept is historically inaccurate, and in the Gawain romances studied earlier Arthur is by no means a villain counterpoised to the perfect Gawain;¹³⁹ instead, he is frequently capable of learning from his chief knight and reforming himself.

The attitude of Northern writers on either side of the border is not anti-Arthur, it is ambivalent. Arthur never loses his splendor, never becomes a roi fainéant, except in the irrelevant Lancelot of the Laik, but at the same time he frequently threatens the independence and feudal rights of his barons. The king is thus both admired and feared, precisely as he was in the historical reality of the North where magnates on either side of the border were both guardians of the king's marches and frequent rebels against the throne. It is this same ambivalence, not detestation, as Matthews would have it, that characterizes the Morte poet's attitude towards Arthur. To say that Arthur is fundamentally good, but with a single weakness, or that he is fundamentally guilty, if heroic, is to miss the balance of the poet's portrayal and the dual nature of Arthur.

Thus, although the poet has seemed to be in favor of rebellion throughout the work, it is clear that the revolt of Mordred is

evil and that Arthur is entirely within his rights in his campaign against him. The keynote to both Lucius and Mordred is their use of Paynims and giants against whom Arthur is "a champion of Christianity."¹⁴⁰ The crucial difference between the wars is that Mordred is Arthur's liegeman and his revolt, unlike Arthur's, was a breaking of his trouthe.¹⁴¹ The poet, then, does not treat his hero as an example of the imperial menace from the South,¹⁴² but as both a glorious and tragic figure.

The death of Arthur is an example of the poet's ambivalence towards the King. He is wounded heroically in battle and his death is glorious. But, at the same time, with his dying breath he orders the slaughter of Mordred's children. A prudent act, suggest some critics, in accord with the "Anglo-Saxon values of the poem."¹⁴³ But a close contemporary took a dimmer view of deathbed execution orders from a king. In The Bruce, Edward I, on his deathbed, orders the execution of captured Scots, and Barbour comments that:

That wes wondir of sic sawis;
 That he to the ded was ner
 Suld answer apon sic maner
 For owten menyng and mercy.¹⁴⁴

One could scarcely ask for a more convincing demonstration of ambivalence. Arthur is technically within his rights and does wish to avoid continued civil strife, but that he acts so on his deathbed exemplifies his continued cruelty and moral blindness.

The ambivalence towards Arthur is also expressed in the

characteristic Northern generosity towards the King's enemies. There is always a demarcation between the forces of his enemies and the leaders themselves. Lucius is arrogant and overweening, but his prowess is never denied and his combat with Arthur is a fitting climax to the first part of the work. Still more human is Mordred, perhaps the most sympathetic villain in all of the versions of the death of Arthur.¹⁴⁵ He is compassionate towards Guenevere and tries to save her by sending her to Ireland, just as he tries unsuccessfully to save their children. It is true that he kills the noblest figure in the work, Gawain, but his lament over him echoes Arthur's and shows him clearly repentant of his treason:

When that renayede renke remembirde hym selven
 Of reverence and ryotes of the rownde table,
 He remyd and repent hym of all his rewthe werkes.
(vss. 3891-94)

A close second to Arthur in the romance is Gawain, and it is here that the poet shows most clearly both his originality and his debt to the romance traditions of the North. In his vast expansion of Gawain's role, the poet is patently following the traditions of his contemporaries. Although succeeding chronicle versions expanded Gawain's role, he never became more than just an important warrior of Arthur. But the position of Gawain in the Alliterative Morte ranks only behind that of Arthur, and his death is perhaps the most pitiful of the many deaths in the romance, since he is the least blameworthy of all the characters.

Gawain's insulting speech to the Emperor that sets off the fighting is uncharacteristic of the smooth-tongued Gawain of Northern romance, and is borrowed instead from the chronicle tradition. However, the poet, with his special command of sources, uses the incident to introduce the theme of reckless bravery that becomes central to his portrait of Gawain.¹⁴⁶

In the scene of the foraging party, the poet presents the Gawain of the Northern poets in all his splendor. For the meeting with Priamus, although taken from a version of the Charlemagne romance Fierabras, or perhaps from an English version,¹⁴⁷ becomes the motif most commonly associated with Gawain since Chrétien: his encounter with a strange knight leads to the gaining of a valuable ally for the Round Table. Thus Gawain meets Priamus, a great pagan warrior, fights him to a draw and leads him back to Arthur to be converted to Christianity and to become a part of the court.

This scene has elicited two opposing views; first that it is meant to contrast Arthur's wars of conquest; second, that it represents a change in the campaign to a war of conquest.¹⁴⁸ But both views are difficult to reconcile with the source. The encounter certainly has romance features, but the poet sees it neither as a deed of "daring, benevolence and compassion," nor "the purposeless ritual of the typical romance combat." Both critics see the battle as an isolated incident. In fact, it is highly productive, either for "conquest, subjugation and expropriation," or for the battle "against

the forces of evil and the pagan world." In opposition to the first view, it can be pointed out that Gawain gains a valuable ally for Arthur's imperialistic war of aggression against Metz, an ally through whose help the city meets its fate. But the scene does not reflect in its purposelessness the fact that Arthur's war has become unlawful, for the result is the conversion of a great Pagan and thus a triumph for Christianity, the highest aim of Arthur's campaign.

The function of the scene, rather, is to develop the figure of Gawain who is neither an opposing force to Arthur, nor a reflection of what is wrong with Arthur's campaign, but is a tragic figure in his own right. The poet follows the romance traditions in making Gawain the greatest of Arthur's knights and his chief support, but he alters the standard Northern portrayal of him in accordance with his own themes. We see little of Gawain's traditional courtesy, mildness of speech, or deference. No kindly words are exchanged between him and Priamus, nor does he bring him to Arthur's court by friendly persuasion but rather by hard blows, and the attraction of his world-wide fame. Loyalty to Arthur, which is so important in the other works, is of paramount value here, but it is expressed in deeds of valor, not in marrying a hag or taking up a Christmas game. In a sense, the poet has carried the Northern process one step further, and, in removing most of the courtliness left in the Northern image of Gawain, ends up with a realistic picture of the knight primarily as a fighting man.

Finlayson is certainly correct in observing that Gawain represents the theme of reckless bravery that causes his death and later Arthur's.¹⁴⁹ In the landing at Dover his boldness becomes excessive and costs him everlasting fame. But, unlike Arthur, who dies condemning children to death, Gawain's fall elicits an elegy that is one of the most moving passages in the romance and is a tribute to his character and importance:

"Here es the hope of my hele: my happynge of armes.
 My herte and my hardynes; hale one hym lengede,
 My concell, my comforthe: that kepide myn herte.
 Of all knyghtes the kyng: that undir Criste lifede,
 Thou was worthy to be kyng: thofe I the corown bare.
 My wele and my wirchipe: of this werlderiche
 Was wonnen thourghe Sir Gawayne: and thourghe his witt one."
 (vss. 3958-64)

Like Roland, his chief virtue is also his downfall, but this same virtue, reckless daring, is the most prized Northern quality, either in real life, as with Hotspur, or in literature, as in Sir Degrevant. But Gawain's death is most particularly reminiscent of The Bruce and the death of James Douglas, whose relationship with King Robert is much like that of Gawain's to Arthur.¹⁵⁰ All through The Bruce we see the bravery and recklessness of Douglas and, just like Gawain, he meets his death against Saracens because in the rashness of his headlong charge he has allowed himself to be cut off from the main army. The similarity of the death scenes of Arthur's to Edward's and Gawain's to Douglas' might indicate a previously unsuspected link between the two works. But what is far more important

is that we see a similar outlook at work on either side of the border, and an admiration of boldness on the battlefield in the history, historical literature, and romances of the North.

Gawain, then, is neither a saintly warrior, nor a foil to Arthur. His particular virtues in this romance are precisely those the North valued most. Yet our poet is too much of a realist to lightly admire this virtue. He is aware that boldness does not always work. Hotspur gained much glory through his daring but his refusal to wait for his father at Shrewsbury brought on his own death, just as James Douglas' impetuosity led to his death. The poet's presentation of Gawain is fully consonant with his realism; he sees the drawbacks as well as the virtues of boldness, just as he presents unflinchingly the glories and horrors of war. His Gawain is a tragic figure, like the King, perhaps a figure his audience might sympathize with more easily. Gawain neither reflects nor contrasts the fall of Arthur, but complements it; one is the fall of a king, the other the fall of a knight who embodies the ideals of Northern chivalry.

Much has been made of the poet's realistic descriptive ability, but we are now able to see that this realism goes beyond description to perhaps the most accurate portrayal we have of the chivalric temperament of the North. What has been said about heroic literature in general, that "it reflects rather than creates the system of values it expresses,"¹⁵¹ could well be applied to the Alliterative Morte Arthure.

Thus the courtesy of the poem is realistically Northern. Those who claim that the work is without courtesy fail to distinguish between the courtesy of Continental romance and that of Northern Middle English romance. Battlefield courtesy is a part of the Alliterative Morte, as Brewer points out,¹⁵² for Gawain is "the hendeste in hawle undire heuene riche" (vs. 3880). Courtesy in the poem involves relationships between men in battle, rather than between men and women and corresponds to the picture of Northern warfare that Froissart gives us.¹⁵³

The portrayal of Arthur is not based on a national rejoicing in the victories of Edward III, for the work is far too late, nor is it based on war-weariness, for the poet loves battle too much. Nor is it related solely to fears of monarchical power and a desire for baronial independence; Arthur is far too noble for that. Rather, the portrayal of Arthur is ambivalent, just as the attitudes of the Northern barons towards the monarchy were ambivalent. In the character of Gawain, his dedicated loyalty, his rough courtesy, and his reckless bravery we discern more clearly than in the courtier Gawain of the other Northern works, the ideal Northern knight.

The atmosphere of the work is perhaps the most revealing aspect of the nature of the Northern feudal revival. What this atmosphere is has been the object of much controversy. Some critics have merely termed it heroic, but this is too general; some claim that the work is in the epic tradition of Beowulf,¹⁵⁴ but it bears only a

superficial resemblance to the Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic heroic code.¹⁵⁵ Rather, as a recent critic of the work has pointed out, it belongs to the world of the Chanson de Geste and perhaps is closest in temperament to the Chanson de Roland.¹⁵⁶ But the chanson spirit was in essence a reflection of the values of an earlier feudal epoch. It is most unusual for such a sentiment to appear in a realistic writer of the fourteenth century. But at that time the chanson sentiment could only appear in the North of England and the border regions of Scotland where the unique combination of the border wars and the previous history of the area brought about a society whose values were parallel to those of the first feudal age. These chanson-like qualities, which have also been noted in The Bruce,¹⁵⁷ are also most clearly expressed in the most realistic poet of the Northern school of Middle English romance.

One cannot come to any general conclusions about the Northern Arthurian romances, because, unlike the Gawain romances, they do not focus on a common hero and, indeed, the only characteristic they share is diversity. If the Gawain romances demonstrate the homogeneity of Northern romance, then the Arthurian tales demonstrate its heterogeneity.

This diversity warns us against a simple interpretation of Northern romance and Northern history. Arthur is not always an imperialistic menace; he can be at the center of the court, as in Ywain and Gawain or Le Morte. It is possible for a poet to express

an anti-feudal bias, as in Le Morte, and still achieve enough popularity to influence works written eighty years later. Such an anti-feudal bias would not have been appreciated among a nobility fighting for their existence, like the barons of Louis VI and Louis VII. But the Northern magnates of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries wielded so much influence and were so often the chief powers behind the throne that they were frequently disposed to look favorably on the monarchy. At the same time they were in frequent conflict, English barons against English kings and Scottish barons against Scottish kings. For example, the Percies helped to bring Henry IV to the throne, but were in turn crushed by him. Thus, instead of simple hostility or support for the throne, there is ambivalence, an ambivalence expressed most clearly in the Alliterative Morte Arthure.

In addition to this reflection of the prevailing political attitudes of the region, the romances all deal with the major concerns of Northern society: private war and vengeance, as in Sir Percyvelle and Sir Degrevant; loyalty, as in Ywain and Gawain and the Stanzaic Morte, and battlefield courtesy and valor, as in the Alliterative Morte. All also reflect the Northern landscape, although none as extensively as the Tarn Wadling group, and all demonstrate attempts of the poet to achieve unity, or to improve upon the structure of the original.

The depth of the adulation of Gawain is seen in those works that are not Gawain poems, where his role is enhanced over the continental traditions. In the Stanzaic Morte, the only work that

condemns him, part of the poet's conception of the hero is derived from the Northern Gawain tradition. The nearly universal respect accorded the character over a period of 150 years reveals the strength and pervasiveness of the Northern tradition.

In the historical tradition of the North we can perceive why Arthurian romance should be so favored over all other types. Arthur is a British hero with Northern associations whose chief knight is specifically Northern. Also, in the continental originals, Arthur rarely plays a central role, leaving the main focus to the exploits of his knights, a subject more congenial to provincial barons than the exploits of kings. Arthur is thus both British and Northern, national and local, monarchical and baronial. Only the broad range of Arthurian literature gave the Northern poets the choice of material that they could adapt to the interests and concerns of the barons and their retinues who made up the bulk of their audience.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 A. Mc. I. Trounce, "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances," MAE, i (1932), 97.
- 2 Margaret P. Medary, "Stanza Linking in Middle English Verse," RR, vii (1916), 270.
- 3 J. P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English (Manchester, 1930, 1935), ii, 38-39.
- 4 W. O. Evans, "Cortaysye in Middle English," Med. St., xxix (1967), 151-157.
- 5 D. S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet," Chaucer and His Contemporaries, ed. Helaine Newstead (New York, 1968), p. 324. Originally appeared in Patterns of Love and Courtesy, ed. John Lawlor (London, 1966)
- 6 Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Baltimore, 1940), p. 33.
- 7 L. H. Loomis, Medieval Romance in England (New York, 1963), p. 306.
- 8 Sir Degrevant, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS, o. s., ccxxi (London, 1949). All quotations are taken from this edition.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 118; L. H. Loomis, *op. cit.*, p. 306, disagrees with this identification.
- 10 For Malory's knowledge of Sir Degrevant see William Matthews, The Ill-Framed Knight (Berkeley, 1966), p. 100.
- 11 Casson, Sir Degrevant, xxxi-xlii.
- 12 A. C. L. Brown, "On the Origin of Stanza-Linking in English Alliterative Verse," RR, vii (1916), 282.
- 13 J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris (London, 1899), i, 158-159.
- 14 Casson, Sir Degrevant, 1xix-1xx; Lillian Hornstein, "Composite

- Romances of Courtly Love," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, 1967), p. 148.
- 15 Casson, p. lxxv.
- 16 Edith Rickert, Early English Romances Done into Modern English, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), pp. xlvii-xlviii.
- 17 John Wilcox, "French Courtly Love in English Composite Romances," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, xviii (1932), 580; L. H. Loomis, op. cit., p. 309. believes that the poet is making use of older romances for this episode.
- 18 L. H. Loomis, loc. cit., attempt to locate the region on the sea coast of Cumberland or Westmoreland.
- 19 Dieter Mehl, The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (New York, 1969), p. 98.
- 20 Hornstein, "Composite Romances of Courtly Love," p. 148.
- 21 Casson, Sir Degrevant, p. lxxiii.
- 22 L. H. Loomis, op. cit., p. 310.
- 23 Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," Med. St., xxvii (1965), 114.
- 24 Hornstein, loc. cit.
- 25 Mehl, The Middle English Romances, p. 99.
- 26 Quotation taken from the Thornton MS., vss. 433-434, which provides a better reading.
- 27 Casson, Sir Degrevant, p. 125.
- 28 Mehl, op. cit., pp. 96-97; L. H. Loomis, op. cit., p. 309. Casson, op. cit., p. lxxv, considers Meliador to be a conventional, shrewish, romance heroine.

- 29 C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford, 1947), pp. 123-124. Meliador's sense of social position is perhaps a manifestation of daunger, but her concept of loyalty is surely unique.
- 30 The "bundling" that the lovers do engage in is probably another example of the poet's realism and his awareness of local custom. Cf. Mehl, op. cit., p. 94.
- 31 Wilcox, "French Courtly Love in English Composite Romances," p. 587.
- 32 Mehl, op. cit., p. 96.
- 33 Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," p. 114.
- 34 L. H. Loomis, "Chaucer and the Auchinleck MS.," Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown (New York, 1940), pp. 116ff.
- 35 "English Rimed and Prose Romances," ALMA, p. 511.
- 36 "A Characterization of English Medieval Romances," Essays on Middle English Literature (Oxford, 1955), p. 12.
- 37 The Development of Arthurian Romance (London, 1963), p. 137.
- 38 Middle English Literature (London, 1951), p. 77.
- 39 Mehl, op. cit., p. 103.
- 40 Medary, "Stanza-Linking in Middle English Verse," p. 269.
- 41 Helaine Newstead, "The Besieged Ladies in Arthurian Romance," PMLA, 1xii (1948), 814-818.
- 42 R. H. Griffith, Sir Perceval of Galles (Chicago, 1911), pp. 7-11.
- 43 Ibid., p. 117.
- 44 See S. J. McHugh, "Sir Percyvelle," its Irish Connections (Ann Arbor, 1946)

- 45 A. C. L. Brown, "The Grail and the English Sir Perceval," MP, xvi-xxii (1919-1925); quotation from vol. xxii (1925), 131.
- 46 "The Besieged Ladies," p. 830
- 47 Op. cit., p. 73.
- 48 Griffith, op. cit., p. 129; Brown, "On the Origin of Stanza-Linking," p. 281; G. H. Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets (Boston, 1907), p. 203; Rachel and Bromwich, "The Celtic Inheritance of Medieval Literature," MLQ, xxvi (1965), p. 225.
- 49 McHugh, op. cit., p. 74.
- 50 For a fine nineteenth century appreciation of the cultural isolation of the North see Thomas B. McCauley, History of England (London, 1849), i, 284.
- 51 Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Romance," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, p. 72; W. H. Schofield, English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer (New York, 1906), p. 230; John Speirs, Medieval Literature, The non-Chaucerian Tradition (London, 1957), p. 122.
- 52 Sir Percyvelle of Gales, ed. J. Campion, F. Holthausen (Heidelberg, 1913). All citations from this edition.
- 53 Matthews, The Ill-Framed Knight, p. 100, sees this dying on crusade as a widespread motif in Northern romance.
- 54 G. W. S. Barrow, Robert Bruce (Berkeley, 1965), pp. 137, 206-207, 249.
- 55 Note especially the family feud in Raoul de Cambrai, W. C. Calin, The Old French Epic of Revolt (Paris, 1962), pp. 10-61; For the role of the feud in feudal life see Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), "The Vendetta," pp. 125-130.
- 56 Pearsall, op. cit., p. 115; Kane, Middle English Literature, p. 77; Mehl, op. cit., p. 102.

- 57 Pearsall, loc. cit., finds the romance latently anti-chivalric.
- 58 R.W. Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," ALMA, p. 511.
- 59 Speirs, op. cit., p. 122; Brown, "The Grail and the English Sir Perceval," MP, xviii (1923), 222.
- 60 For Elizabeth Salter, the works are simply translations or paraphrases, "The Alliterative Revival," MP, lxiv (1967), 146-150.
- 61 A.B. Friedman, B.T. Harrington, eds. Ywain and Gawain, EETS, os, ccliv (London, 1964), pp. lvii-lviii.
- 62 The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 141.
- 63 Op. cit., p. 103.
- 64 "Ywain and Gawain and Le Chavalier au Lion," The Modern Language Quarterly, ii (1899), 202.
- 65 A.H. Billings, A Guide to the Middle English Metrical Romances (New York, 1901), pp. 158-159.
- 66 Mehl, op. cit., p. 185.
- 67 Friedman, Harrington, Ywain and Gawain, pp. xlvi-lv.
- 68 Friedman, Harrington. All quotations from this edition.
- 69 Ibid., note, p. 111.
- 70 Weston, "Ywain and Gawain," pp. 101-106; Ackerman, op. cit., p. 508. One proof of his knowledge of versions other than Chretien's is his vastly improved description of the scene where Ywain is trapped in the barbican. But the poet might simply be exercising his typically Northern gift for realistic description.
- 71 Friedman, Harrington, pp. xvii-xxvi
- 72 Ibid., p. xxix.

- 73 Ackerman, loc. cit.
- 74 Ojars Kratin, "Love and Marriage in Three Versions of the Knight of the Lion," CL, xvi (1964), 38.
- 75 Ibid., p. 39.
- 76 For the rehabilitation of Yvain see A. Adler, "Sovereignty in Chrétien's Yvain," PMLA, lxii (1947), 304-305; J. Harris, "The Role of the Lion in Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain," PMLA, lxiv (1949), 1151, 1163.
- 77 Mehl, op. cit., p. 184.
- 78 Friedman, Harrington, op. cit., p. 131.
- 79 Robert the Bruce, for example, re-introduced and spread the custom of knight-service. Barrow, op. cit., pp. 402-406.
- 80 Friedman, Harrington, op. cit., pp. 108-110.
- 81 William A. Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chretien de Troyes," MP 1 (1952-53), 222-224.
- 82 Friedman, Harrington, op. cit., p. 110.
- 83 Ibid., p. xxxiii.
- 84 Ibid., p. xvii.
- 85 Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," p. 103.
- 86 P. J. Ketrick, The Relation of "Golagros and Gawain" to the Old French "Perceval", (Washington, 1931), pp. 108-116.
- 87 Jean Frappier, "Chrétien de Troyes," ALMA, pp. 181-184.
- 88 W. W. Skeat, "The Author of the Lancelot of the Laik," S.H.R., viii (1907), p. 1.
- 89 M. M. Gray, Lancelot of the Laik, ed. M. M. Gray, S.T.S., n. s., ii (Edinburgh, 1912), p. xxxvi.

- 90 Ibid., p. xiv.
- 91 Walter Scheps, "The Thematic Unity of Lancelot of the Laik," Studies in Scottish Literature, v (1968), 170. Even Chaucer uses alliteration in his battle scenes. Cf. The Knight's Tale, vss. 2605-2613.
- 92 Gray, op. cit., p. xvii. But the more likely ultimate source is William of Malmesbury's Gesta Regum Anglorum. See Chapter Five of this study.
- 93 Scheps, op. cit., p. 170.
- 94 Gray, op. cit., p. xiii; Ackerman, op. cit., p. 492.
- 95 Bertram Vogel, "Secular Politics and the date of Lancelot of the Laik," SP, x1 (1940), 11.
- 96 Ibid., p. 9; On this basis, Vogel places the composition of the poem in 1482 instead of the previously accepted 1475.
- 97 Ibid., pp. 6-9.
- 98 Elise F.W.M. Van der ven-ten Bensel, The Character of King Arthur in English Literature (Amsterdam, 1925), p. 135.
- 99 E.K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London, 1927), p. 129; K.H. Göller, "König Arthur in den Schottischen Chroniken," Anglia, 1xx (1962), 390-404.
- 100 H.S. Bennett, Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century (Oxford, 1947), pp. 165-166.
- 101 Kane, Middle English Literature, p. 17.
- 102 J.D. Bruce, ed., Le Morte Arthur, EETS, es, 1xxxvii (London, 1903), p. xxv.
- 103 Eugene Vinaver, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 1st ed. (Oxford, 1947), iii, 1000ff.
- 104 J.D. Bruce, "The Development of the Mort Arthur Theme in

- Medieval Romance," RR, iv (1913), 425.
- 105 R. H. Wilson, "Malory, The Stanzaic Morte Arthur, and Mort Artu," MP, xxxvii (1939), 136.
- 106 Wilson, op. cit., p. 138; See also E. T. Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur," SP, xlvii (1950), 461, 472.
- 107 Donaldson, op. cit., 470; Kane, op. cit., pp. 65-69.
- 108 Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," p. 116; Newstead, "The Arthurian Romances," p. 81.
- 109 Lucy Allan Paton, Two Early English Romances (London, 1912), p. xv; Bruce, Le Morte Arthur, p. xxix.
- 110 R. S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 139; Mehl, op. cit., p. 186.
- 111 Pearsall, op. cit., p. 116.
- 112 Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," p. 490.
- 113 K. H. Göller, König Arthur in der Englischen Literatur des Späten Mittelalters (Göttingen, 1963), p. 73.
- 114 Bruce's Edition. All quotations taken from this edition.
- 115 Malory, with his finer sense of structure, makes the attempted killing of Gawain an act of vengeance for Gawain's murder of Lamorak.
- 116 E. F. W. M. Van der ven-ten Bensel, op. cit., p. 132.
- 117 Although Paton, op. cit., xi, and O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," ALMA, p. 526, agree that the Alliterative Morte poet knew of the Vulgate version of the fall, there is no apparent awareness of this in any other Northern romance. The prophecy of Arthur's fall in The Awntyrs tells the chronicle version.
- 118 B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Med. St., ix (1947), 202.

- 119 However, we must not forget that Gawain "is an honest and heroic figure in the last act of the story of Arthur." Whiting, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-208.
- 120 Mort Artu, ed. J. Frappier 2nd ed. (Paris, 1956), p. 106
- 121 *Ibid.*, p. 73
- 122 A. J. App, Lancelot in English Literature (Washington, 1929), p. 36.
- 123 Bensely, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- 124 App, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-45; Goller, Konig Arthur, p. 73.
- 125 Mehl, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-189,
- 126 For a discussion of the function of loyalty in the work see Mehl, pp. 187-190, who sees in Gawain and the Green Knight a similar conception of adultery and loyalty, p. 279, note 27.
- 127 John Finlayson, "Morte Arthure, the Date and a Source for the Contemporary References," Speculum, xlii (1967), 624-638.
- 128 This study has not concentrated much on the Alliterative Revival, since it is attempting to prove a common outlook in Northern romance regardless of poetic form. See J. R. Hulbert, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," MP, xxxviii (1931), 405-422.
- 129 English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer, p. 254.
- 130 J. P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English, ii, 37-38.
- 131 William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley, 1960)
- 132 J. L. N. O'Loughlin, "The Alliterative Romances," p. 522.
- 133 Loomis, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
- 134 Finlayson, *op. cit.*, p. 638; George B. Parks, "King Arthur and the Roads to Rome," JEGP, xlv (1946), 164-170.

- 135 Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur, pp. 105-128; Finlayson, Morte Arthure (London, 1967), p. 13.
- 136 Matthew, loc. cit. et. passim; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 19; Bensel, op. cit., pp. 125-126
- 137 Larry D. Benson, "The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Medieval Tragedy," Tennessee Studies in Literature, xi (1966), 84; Loomis op. cit., pp. 151-152; O'Loughlin, op. cit., p. 524.
- 138 Morte Arthure, ed. E. Björkman (Heidelberg, 1915). All quotations from this edition.
- 139 Matthews, op. cit., p. 139.
- 140 Finlayson, op. cit., p. 19.
- 141 The Epics of Revolt also distinguish between rebellion, which is sometimes justified, and treason, which is always condemned. See Calin, op. cit., p. 141.
- 142 Göller, König Arthur, p. 176.
- 143 Benson, op. cit., p. 77; Bensel, op. cit., p. 125.
- 144 The Bruce, ed. John Jamieson (Glasgow, 1864), iii, 550-554.
- 145 Matthews, op. cit., pp. 142-144.
- 146 Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 19.
- 147 R.H. Griffith, "Malory, Morte Arthure and Fierabras," Anglia, xxxii (1909), 390; Finlayson, op. cit., p. 32, note 34.
- 148 Matthews, op. cit., pp. 145ff.; Finlayson, op. cit., pp. 19ff.
- 149 Loc. cit.; G. Matthews, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late Fourteenth Century England," Studies in Medieval History Presented to F. M. Powicke (Oxford, 1948), p. 358, considers rashness to be a term of praise. It may well be in Southern romance, but, except for Sir Degrevant, rashness is rarely rewarded in Northern chivalric literature.

- 150 For another possible source see George Clark, "Gawain's Fall: The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Hastings," Tennessee Studies in Literature, xi (1966), 89-95. Clark finds a parallel between the death of Gawain and the death of Harold at Hastings, but this source seems rather remote for a poet who took his inspiration from contemporary reality.
- 151 Finlayson, op. cit., p. 9
- 152 Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet," p. 341
- 153 Benson, op. cit., compares the battle scenes with Froissart's account of Poitiers, but there are parallels much closer to the poet's home in the wars of the North.
- 154 Everett, "The Alliterative Revival," p. 62; Oakden, op. cit., ii, 35-36.
- 155 Matthews, op. cit., p. 97.
- 156 Finlayson, op. cit., pp. 5-14.
- 157 James Kinsley, "The Medieval Makars," Scottish Poetry, A Critical Survey ed. James Kinsley (London, 1955), p. 3; Bennett, Chaucer and the 15th Century, pp. 166-167.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

CONCLUSIONS

It is perhaps possible to conclude this study of Northern romance with a tentative sketch of its beginnings, development and decay in Scotland and England. The details of this history are of necessity blurred by the paucity of the remains. Only one work, The Awntyrs, exists in more than a few MSS., and we must assume the loss of many romances that would at the very least have improved our understanding of the Northern school, and, more regrettably, might have equaled some of its illustrious products. Nevertheless, we can discern a general pattern in the history of Northern romance, and we can also observe that this pattern is consonant with the pattern of the feudal revival of the North.

The fact that the early works of the school are in tail-rhyme and that tail-rhyme remains a dominant form in Northern romance would suggest that the North owes some of its traditions to the East Midlands school. The Charlemagne romances, The Sege of Melayne and Sir Otuel, are perhaps links. Both are related to the East Midlands school, but both show the influence of the Northern outlook.

The Sege in particular can be viewed as a link. Although it dates from a later period, it clearly expresses Northern themes in a non-Northern genre. Already the vigor of the North has transformed a work of a worn out school into a lively and forceful romance. The hostility between the Bishop and the King and the ambivalent presentation of Charlemagne, who is both craven and hero, reflects the Northern treatment of Arthur. The chivalry of the work, based

mainly on battlefield prowess, is also typically Northern. Its possible link with the battle of Neville's Cross and with the political situation in the palatinate of Durham is a touch of Northern localism.

Yet, in many ways, the work differs from Northern Arthurian romance. Its heroes are continental, not British, and the poet makes no attempt to Anglicize them. The Saracens are faceless enemies who fall in hordes before the sword of Bishop Turpin. Unity is not apparent in the work; it is true that the tale is incomplete, but one cannot sense the beginnings of any clear structure. Nor, outside of its vigorous meter and alliteration, is there any awareness of Northern poetic conventions; description is limited and the topography is generalized.

The Sege thus reflects the traditions of both the East Midlands and the Northern schools, but, for reasons earlier discussed, most Northern poets eschewed the Carolingian material for the far more congenial Arthurian tradition. The earliest works of that tradition are Sir Percyvelle and Ywain and Gawain. As we have noted above, Sir Percyvelle uses some of the Northern traditions but reflects only slightly the ideals or the realities of Northern society. Ywain and Gawain is more purely Northern, except for its rather old-fashioned meter and its close reliance on a Continental original.

Shortly after the composition of Ywain and Gawain comes what can only be termed the flowering of the Northern school, a period of some fifty years that produced two of the greatest works of

Middle English literature and at least five others that hold an esteemed place in the corpus of Middle English romance.

But coincidental with this flowering is the highpoint of the Northern feudal revival. The years 1375-1425 were a period when the Northern barons dominated English politics, where the Percies could topple one throne, and severely shake another and yet be forgiven within a decade. It was also a time of bitter border conflict, culminating in Otterburn, the paradigm of the Northern chivalric experience. We lack sufficient evidence to connect any of these romances to the great events of the North, but we have been able to discern congruent outlooks in the history and literature of the region.

All of the works of the flowering are Gawain romances, with the exception of the tangential Sir Degrevant and the alliterative and stanzaic versions of the death of Arthur. Such a number of romances based on a single character is clear evidence of the unified outlook that could only be the result of a school of poetry. Gawain was celebrated, not because he was the subject of a now lost insular romance, but because he embodied the archaic ideals of the society of the region, and, in his traditional Northern associations, satisfied the provincial tastes of his audience. The two Arthurian works of the flowering owe much to the Gawain tradition; the Stanzaic Morte, for its development of its central character Lancelot, and the Alliterative Morte, for its exaltation of the hero.

Within these Gawain works is a smaller group that might be

termed the Tarn Wadling romances. These works are characterized by a special feature: they all refer to a specific location, Carlisle, the now-filled-in Tarn Wadling and Inglewood forest. Works of this group include The Avowyngge of Arthur, Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, The Awntyrs of Arthur, and the lost Northern original of The Weddyngge of Sir Gawain. While their quality, style, and themes vary considerably, in their precise references to place they demonstrate a common kinship. We lack further evidence for the nature or location of this literary center, but the considerable number of romances from a small area over a short period of time testifies to the presence of some sort of center of romance production. Almost all Northern romances make use of local color, but the Tarn Wadling works in particular point up the effect of Northern topography on the works of that region.

At the same time that romance writing flourished in the North of England it also flowered in Scotland. Again we face a problem of the absence of texts, for there are no early Scottish romances; Barbour is the first voice. Perhaps because he was the first he owes little to the tail-rhyme or alliterative traditions of the other side of the border and uses the older octosyllabic couplets form. But if his style is not Northern, his themes are; in fact he is our best link between the history and the literature of the North. His historical accuracy clearly proves the reality of the chivalric ideals of the area, while his thematic unity, his concept of courtesy, and his realistic

approach to war and boldness echo his near contemporary on the other side of the border, the Alliterative Morte poet.

We are at least aware of the existence of lost romances after Barbour. From Andrew of Wyntoun we learn of "Hucheon of þe Aule Realle," who "made a gret geste of Arture/ And þe Awntyre of Gawane/ Oe pistil als of suet Susane."¹ Dunbar, in his Lament for the Makers refers to the "Clerk of tranent eik he hes tane/ That maid the Anterys of Gawain."² These two references have prompted considerable scholarly investigation and controversy, but have largely proven to be blind alleys.³ Although The Pistil of Susan is still extant we cannot reasonably identify any surviving romance with either the Anterys of Gawain or the Great Gest of Arthur. All that we can glean from these references is that there were Northern romances that have since disappeared that focused on Arthur and Gawain and were written in the period 1375-1425. That a Scottish poet would write a "gest" of Arthur is further proof that the hostility of the Scottish chroniclers towards Arthur was notably absent in the romances that were motivated by chivalry, not nationalism.

We can suppose the existence of other, now lost, Scottish works, for Golagros and Gawain, a later romance from the 1460s, preserves the best qualities of the Northern school and is one of its finest achievements. Our details of contemporary works are scanty, but from the evident influence of Northern Arthurian romance traditions on Rauf Coilgear, which was written in the 1440s, the genre

continued to flourish in Scotland until the third quarter of the fifteenth century.

We possess no clear indication of the end of the Northern tradition in England. After The Avowyng, which was composed around 1425, the romances simply come to an end. The problem again may well be the absence of texts, since the Thornton MS., our chief source of Northern romance, dates from only 1430.⁴

The last English romance in a Northern dialect is Scottish Ffield. The work, the last alliterative poem composed in England, was written in 1515 and commemorates the Battle of Flodden.⁵ The fact that the poem focuses on the role of the House of Stanley is clear evidence for the existence and survival of literary patronage by the great baronial families of the North. Yet the traditions of Northern romance are not apparent here, and while some of the battle descriptions are lively, its treatment of the Scots as faceless enemies indicates that it is a product of a Nationalist, not chivalric, outlook.

We have considerably more evidence about the end of the Northern school in Scotland. Although the Scottish court was apparently attuned to the Northern outlook at the time of Barbour, the traditions of the South, and of the Continent, became much more important, and the bulk of the extant poetry of fifteenth century Scotland has little to do with Northern romance. We have observed that Lancelot of the Laik and The Wallace, works of two court poets, are cut off from local traditions. In The Wallace, the English are treacherous villains

against whom any tactic of war is justified, while in the Lancelot the major concerns are court and international politics. The fact that neither of them is much of a literary achievement illustrates how inappropriate the traditions of the Scottish court poets were to the genre of chivalric romance.

The North continued to be an area of considerable literary production during the next two hundred years; some of the works of this period are better known today than any of the romances. But this creativity was in the form of ballads and represented an entirely different esthetic and sensibility. To be sure, there are similar themes of vengeance and conflicting loyalties, private warfare and heroic deaths, but there is also love and the supernatural. Furthermore the theme of chivalric ideals in action has passed away. In the most baronial of the works, The Hunting of the Cheviot, the chivalric utterances of the figures involved have become idealistic postures, not reflections of the realities of border warfare of the fourteenth century. Similarly, the ballads' romantic treatment of life is not a part of the Northern romance sensibility. In their absence of the baronial spirit, then, we must conclude that the audience of the ballads was not the audience of Northern romance, for the border barons had either lost their provinciality or had disappeared.⁶

We can thus assign some rough dates for the Northern school: its earliest production is Sir Percyvelle, written around 1330, and its last is Golagros and Gawain, composed around 1460. These dates,

however, also represent the span of the feudal renaissance of the North. It was only after Bannockburn that England resorted to means of local defence and that Robert began to re-introduce feudalism. The Wars of the Roses, besides decimating the nobility of the North, and ultimately destroying their military power, also probably served to break down the provinciality of the magnates, although probably not that of their retainers, and spelled the end of indigenous romance traditions. In Scotland, the flowering of the court poets overshadowed the Northern school; nevertheless, the tradition survived at least until 1460. We can perhaps surmise that later, now lost, romances were composed, but even this tradition came to an end at Flodden field, which, in its slaughter of the Border barons of Scotland, spelled the end of the Northern tradition of romance.

The feudal revival, then, is inextricably connected to the romances of the North, and along with the earlier history of the region shaped the nature of the literary flowering of the area. For one quality apparent in Northern history until the Industrial Revolution, and even beyond, is the area's isolation. That the region was in large measure cut off from the literature of the rest of Britain surely was an important factor in its development of its own poetic traditions. At the same time, its cultural isolation and backwardness made the audience more receptive to older stories and local legends and traditions.

This conservatism, endemic to the region even before the feudal revival, made for considerable uniformity among the artists.

Poetic conventions once established endure for 150 years; attitudes towards certain characters like Gawain and Arthur are uniform, and concerns seem to remain local. Continental sources are given a local setting to be more palatable to the audience and to the romancers. Thus, Arthur becomes a Northern king, hunting in Inglewood forest, holding court at Carlisle and dealing with the barons of the region.

We might cautiously observe that the nature of the land itself helped to determine some of the uniquely Northern characteristics of topographical precision and reference to the weather. The landscape, particularly of Cumberland, still attracts visitors and it is difficult to write romances during a Northern winter that take place only in the conventional spring setting. Of course the Northern romancers were by no means nature poets, but they were aware of their sometimes inclement surroundings.

Some support for this notion of the effect of the land on the romances can be found in a similar effect on the ballads, which apparently owe little to the Northern school. In the ballads we find minute topographical references, while what has been said about their treatment of the weather, that they "convey to the modern reader the instant conviction of something that the centuries have in no way changed,"⁷ could also be applied to the romances. We must not forget that Cumberland, four hundred years later, produced England's outstanding nature poet.

Thus the previous history of the North, its isolation, its

backwardness and its location, all predisposed the region to create its own distinctive literature. But the aspects of this distinctiveness were in large measure shaped by the aspects of the society that arose as a result of the Anglo-Scottish wars.

We have observed that the characteristic feature of this society was the revitalization of its feudal elements: a return to military service in exchange for land, a partial resumption of private, or at least baronial, warfare, and a tremendous growth in the power of the Northern magnates. The growth of feudalism and the continual warfare that racked the region meant that "feudal chivalry" was again a practical requirement. Painter points out how in feudal chivalry class solidarity is more important than national interest,⁸ but the phenomenon is even more apparent in the North. In the Hundred Years war Frenchmen remained Frenchmen and Englishmen remained Englishmen, but the border wars frequently led to alliances between Englishman and Scot against one or the other's monarch. Chivalry is not a game in the North, for there are no tournaments or play fights; the battles of the region are marked by their ferocity, since men were fighting for their own property. But fair dealing and chivalric treatment was necessary in dealing with a foe who could easily become a valued ally. Archibald Douglas, Hotspur's prisoner at Homildoun Hill, became his ally against Henry IV. Yet, at the same time, a group of French knights in Scotland complained because the region was too poor to permit the elaborate artifices of chivalry that they had

been used to on the Continent.⁹

At a time, then, when money payments had replaced knight service, when war was becoming national and chivalry a pleasant pastime, the North is characterized by a return to knight service, a reappearance of baronial warfare and the concept of chivalry as a necessary quality for the dealings of the nobility. This practical chivalry excluded, as we have learned from Froissart, lady worship and the chivalry of courtly love. Religious chivalry also does not enter the picture. Although some of the nobles with Northern associations, like Henry of Lancaster, fought by the side of the Teutonic knights, the exigencies of border defense deferred such crusading for most. Thus the Bruce was frustrated in his wish to recapture the Holy Sepulchre and James Douglas, who did fall against the Moors, could go crusading only when there was a lull in the Anglo-Scottish hostilities. The cloister and the bedroom, which transformed chivalry elsewhere,¹⁰ were not factors in Northern chivalry.

The extent to which the chivalric literature of the North reflected actual chivalric practises is not germane to our study. We have observed several correspondences between chivalric behavior and the romances, while the life of David Lindsay is as noble and courteous as any of the portraits of Gawain.¹¹ But warfare was probably as barbaric and betrayal as common as anywhere else in medieval Europe. However, more important than the nature of the historical practises, which is the task of the social historian, are

the distinctive ideals cherished by Northern society, and we see these values mirrored in the literature of the region.

Painter, in his discussion of feudal chivalry, lists its chief virtues as prowess, loyalty, generosity and courtesy, the last being confined to relationships between knights.¹² But these same virtues are at the center of Northern romance and are embodied in the portrayal of Gawain. Valor is the basis of all the others, but the romancers' awareness of the dangers of an excess of valor, of too much boldness, is due to their observation of the events of the North and to their realistic approach. Courtesy becomes broadened to include deference to, and consideration of, women, strangers, and common people, but it is still neither religious nor love-oriented. Generosity is expressed in the hospitality offered strangers, or in the largess of Sir Degrevant. It, along with courtesy, appears in the motif of the Noble Adversary that permeates Northern romance. Of all these virtues the most important is trouthe, the virtue necessary for the survival of society and the most characteristic of Gawain in his relationship to his king. At the same time, the conflicting loyalties of the Northern barons find their expression in the conflicting loyalties that are a main theme in Northern chivalric literature.

The chivalric virtues of Northern romance are thus comparable to the feudal chivalry that was a product of the first feudal age. It is considerably more refined, of course, because, while there are certain similarities, four hundred years have elapsed, and the North,

while insular, was scarcely cut off from the rest of Europe. Yet the closest analogues to the romances of the North are not contemporary English romances from other regions, nor later Arthurian romances, but the Chansons de Geste and the early Arthurian romances that were expressions of, or recollections of, the first feudal age.

Thus, just as the nature of the feudal revival of the North was parallel to the first feudal age, so the literature of the region is parallel to the literature of the first feudal age. One must be careful not to exaggerate the similarities, for Northern feudalism was very much a unique phenomenon. But if we wish to understand its society and literature, we must look to earlier, not contemporary, societies and literatures.

The feudal structure of the North is also responsible for the unusual artistic refinement of the romances of the region. For here, as nowhere else in Britain, the audience was aristocratic, not lower class or bourgeois.¹³ Romances are composed for delivery in a baron's hall, not in a market place, and many of the works reveal clerical authorship. Furthermore, the power and wealth of the Northern magnates must have made possible a fair level of support for the romancers, and the number of powerful barons must have insured the possibility of many different centers of patronage.

The two factors of a homogenous society and a feudal polity account in large measure for the similarities and differences of the Northern romances. Poetic conventions and tastes were widespread

and durable; thus, all the romances reveal attempts at structuring and unity, goals which are also a product of the refinement of both poet and audience. Yet all of the good poets demonstrate highly individual points of view, whether it be the high seriousness of the Alliterative Morte, the elegiac quality of the Stanzaic Morte, the political concerns of Golagros, or the humorous outlook of Rauf Coilgear. The themes of the romancers are the concerns of Northern society, but the romances themselves are the product of strongly individual artists.

The political situation of the North is a significant factor in shaping the attitude of many of the poets towards the monarchy. The ambivalent attitudes towards the throne of the Northerners are reflected in the ambivalent but never totally hostile portrayal of Arthur. Gawain, the Northern hero, frequently balances Arthur and, through his courtesy and consideration, the latter's misdeeds are frequently corrected. But, as we have observed, the idea of baronial opposition to the king is oversimplified and Arthur is never painted in the same colors as are the French kings of the Epics of Revolt. None of the true Northern Arthurian romances are specifically political, but they do express the complex situation and shifting loyalties that existed on either side of the border.

As a result of this study we can begin to understand the importance of provenance in classifying Middle English romance, and how the differences brought about by locale can be more important

than differences of form, sources, or date. Trounce's identification of an East Midlands school is thus paralleled by this identification of a Northern school. It is also clear that, while matters of period, genre, and meter have their place in criticism, for the North, at least, these distinctions are blurred by the common outlook of the romances of the region.

The nature of the distinctiveness of Northern romance also sheds some light on the nature of the feudal renaissance of the North. The policies of local defence established after the Scottish War of Independence reinforced earlier tendencies towards separatism and deeply affected the ideals of the area. Bloch's observation that the liveried retainers of Plantagenet times were in many ways revivals of an earlier feudal epoch¹⁴ can be better applied to the North, whose literature shows how the chivalric ideals of the revival were not those of contemporary society, but of an earlier time.

The vexing question of the sudden awakening of Arthurian romance at such a date is also solved by this understanding of Northern romance. Rather than being a result of national exultation in the victories of Edward III, they are the result of the appearance of provincial baronial audiences. Through our understanding of the complex political situation of the North we have observed the dangers of oversimplifying the attitudes of Northern poets towards Arthur and the English throne.

We can also perceive why Gawain became so important at such

a late date. He is neither a symbol of baronial opposition, nor a semi-mythical figure from the Celtic past. Instead, just as Perceval or Galahad represented religious chivalry, and Lancelot or Tristan represented Courtly Love chivalry, Gawain, in his personification of feudal chivalry, represented best the chivalric ideals of the North.

By a study of Northern romances as a group we have observed common poetic traditions that might not have come to light if the works had been studied individually or examined strictly according to type. Thus the marvellous structure of Gawain and the Green Knight, so justly praised by critics, is now seen to be simply the best example of a school whose hallmark was structure and unity. The descriptive powers of the Gawain poet and the Alliterative Morte poet are not their monopoly, but are shared by many Northern poets. Similarly, their capable handling of meter and style are properties of their poetic tradition. Gawain and the Green Knight and the Morte Arthure bring the Northern esthetic to its highest point, but they are not the only products of that esthetic.

If literature is to be judged solely by its later influence, then we must dismiss most of Northern romance. Except for parts of Malory, and Chaucer's reference to Sir Percyvelle, the works never found a wider audience and vanished with the Middle Ages to be recovered only in modern times. Yet the value of Northern romance, even apart from the merits of its literary productions, is immense. It illuminates the history of the region, it contains the only English

chivalric romances of any importance or vitality, and it cautions us against characterizing a period on the basis of the literary productions of the capital. The Northern school has little impact on later English literature, but it should not be forgotten by contemporary Middle English scholarship.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Andrew of Wyntoun, Original Chronicle, ed. F.J. Amours, S.T.S., o. s., lvi (London, 1906), book v, vss. 4280, 4310-12.
- 2 Dunbar's Poems, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), vss. 65-67.
- 3 H.N. MacCracken rejected Huchown's authorship of The Awntyrs and the Alliterative Morte; "Concerning Huchown," PMLA, xxv (1910), 507-534. In spite of some challenges this position is still accepted. See J.P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English, ii (Manchester, 1935), 88-89.
- 4 J.L.N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," ALMA, p. 521.
- 5 Scotis Ffield, ed. J.P. Oakden, Chetham Society, n. s., xciv (Manchester, 1935), p. viii.
- 6 A clear indication of the changing tastes of the baronial audience is apparent in the Book of the Howlat, which was composed for a member of the Douglas family c. 1450. Part of the poem is a bird fable owing much to the Parlement of Foules, but there is also a digression, the best part of the poem, that focuses on the battle-field exploits of the Douglas family. The work is thus an attempt to reconcile the two schools. See Oakden, Alliterative Poetry, ii, 81-82 and William Craigle, "The Scottish Alliterative Poems," Proceedings of the British Academy, xxviii (1942), 228-229.
- 7 James Fergusson, "The Ballads," Scottish Poetry: a Critical Survey, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1955), p. 107.
- 8 Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Baltimore, 1940), pp. 54-59.
- 9 Froissart, The Chronicles, trans. Lord Berners, Tudor Club ed. (London, 1902), iii, 3, 20-24.
- 10 Painter, op. cit., p. 65.
- 11 For a review of the life of Sir David Lindsay see Coleman O. Parson, "A Scottish Father of Courtesy and Malory," Speculum, xx (1945), 51-64.

- 12 Op. cit., pp. 28-34.
- 13 Karl Brunner, "Middle English Metrical Romances and their Audience," Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of A. C. Baugh, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 219-227.
- 14 Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), p. 449.

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