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Introduction

In the decades following the Norman Conquest, a new dialect of Old French expressed England's gradual detachment from continental influence. Usually called Anglo-Norman after the political and geographic divisions that gave rise to it, this dialect originated in the many continental vernaculars spoken by the conquerors and their followers, but it soon became "a language apart," defining aurally the separation of its speakers from France.¹ The romances written in Anglo-Norman dialect, while not much noticed on the continent, had a profound influence on emerging Middle English romance. In this study I argue that Anglo-Norman romances and their Middle English versions form a distinctively "insular" body of works, closely related to one another and to their situation in England. Divided from continental romance in emphases as in language, the insular works share poetic concerns and techniques that respond forcefully to issues of their time and place.

To acknowledge a poem's engagement in the world is not to refuse its validity as poetic object. While many postformalist theories continue to deny the text any substantive historical affiliations, much can be discovered about insular romances by investigating the temporal conditions of romance writing and the historical dimensions of the texts themselves. Even if the ways in which literature and history overlap and interact are elusive, even if the past is only imperfectly accessible to us, the effort to reconnect literature to history is vital for those who believe that literary texts are social communications that played a part in the lives of their first audiences. The insular romances deal with the historical world just as surely as they reflect on and liberate themselves from the world. In studying these relations, I examine fundamental historical conditions of order, justice, power, and the like to which the romances particularly attend. I then consider how those conditions were conceptualized in the romances, and why they might have been conceptualized as they were.

The Norman Conquest reduced English to a subjugated language and literature for a time. However, to imagine that the Normans simply superposed continental French power on English life and literature is inaccurate. In many ways the settlers could soon be distinguished from their continental contemporaries; in many ways they grew less distinguishable from the English with whom they lived. The patterns of their assimilation deny the simpler view that for two centuries English and the English were suppressed, French and the French dominant. Rather, the interaction between cultural groups in England contributed to the formation of a new insular culture, one distinct from cultural formations in France.

A second change in rule, nearly as momentous for literary purposes as the Norman Conquest, further divided Anglo-Norman language and literature from the continent. With the coronation of Henry II in 1154, Norman control of the English crown was lost to the Angevin dynasty. Whereas the Normans had treated England and Normandy as a political and cultural unit, the Angevins did not attempt to integrate England so fully in their much more extensive provincial holdings.² By the later twelfth century the growing political isolation of England was manifested in feudal institutions and laws that differed in some respects from those of French provinces. England's differences inspired insular settlers with new visions of ideal

¹ Rothwell, "Anglo-Norman Perspectives," p.42; see also [Crane] Dannenbaum, "Anglo-Norman Romances."

² The differences between Anglo-Norman (AN) and Angevin rule, including the increased isolation of England from holdings in France, are stressed by Le Patourel, *The Norman Empire*, pp. 102-17; and by Hollister, "Anglo-Norman *Regnum*."

achievement and right social order; and as literature written in Anglo-Norman dialect assessed and responded to those visions, it diverged from the norms of continental literature.

While Anglo-Norman literature was becoming more thoroughly insular, the Angevin courts were encouraging other literary developments. The courts of Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and their sons were great centers of cultural activity. But the taste and the vernacular of this new dynasty were not primarily Anglo-Norman. Rather, Champenois, Norman, and even Provençal literature flourished in the peripatetic Angevin courts. The *Roman de Thebes*, *Eneas*, and works of Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Robert Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Bernart de Ventadorn, Bertran de Born, and Arnaut Daniel can be associated with the Angevins. Their courts clearly favored imaginative literature of the continent, and indeed the Angevin ruling family probably found England the least cultured of its many dominions.³

During the later twelfth century, then, French literature in England can be divided into continental (including Norman) works that flourished in the royal courts, and works in Anglo-Norman dialect that were more deeply rooted in insular history and society. Precise boundaries for Anglo-Norman literature cannot be established: some literary historians would prefer to include all French works composed or copied in England, while others would exclude all but the most strongly dialectal. I take the presence of any dialectal peculiarities in the composition of a work as the essential criterion of Anglo-Norman identity, since this dialect is a concrete sign of distance from the continent and participation in England's daily life.⁴ As England grew socially and politically more separate from the continent in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Middle English literature predictably drew its first strength from the dual insular sources of English tradition and Anglo-Norman literature.

Historical investigation offers a fresh approach to a literature that has discouraged critical analysis. Anglo-Norman romances do not meet the standards of Old French literature, as modern critics and medieval French audiences seem to agree.⁵ Scholars accuse Middle English romances of many aesthetic weaknesses and are perplexed that these works could have been favored to the extent that the manuscript evidence indicates.⁶ In looking elsewhere for these texts' sources of power, we might well stop asking if they are aesthetically simple or subtle, or realistic or escapist, and explore instead what they did for their insular audience, how they measured the issues of their day, and what strength could be taken from them for sustaining or resisting the ideas of their time. These questions are not narrowly historical. Rather, they insist that the romances' aesthetic dimensions carry important meanings in the world as well as in the text. My investigation attends less to the literary sources and influences of insular romances than to their own voicing of social relations, their challenges to contemporary belief, and their reformulations of the life they observe.

³ See Chapter 4, nn. 17-34. Dronke reviews patronage studies in "Peter of Blois."

⁴ This criterion excludes from my study such works as *Fergus*, set in Scotland but probably composed in northeast France (see Owen, "*Fergus*"), *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, and the *lais* of Marie de France (on her continental dialect see Ewert, ed., *Lais*, pp. xx-xxi). These works are to some degree in touch with insular life and thus share some interests with AN romance. Of works I include, the *Lai d'Haveloc* has the fewest AN dialectal traits despite its obvious insular origin and appeal.

⁵ E.g., "Les productions anglo normandes ont très tôt acquis sur le continent une réputation fâcheuse"; they appear "barbares" in dialect, composition, and style (Le Gentil, "*Amadas et Ydoine*," p. 372). Next to Old French (OF) romances, C. B. West concludes, AN works "show comparatively little interest in the analysis of emotional states"; they are "more pedestrian" than the troubadours, more "practical" and "prosaic" than Chrétien de Troyes (*Courtoisie*, p. 168). From her continental perspective, West is unable to suggest why AN poets might have modified continental patterns and what values they substituted for continental French *courtoisie*.

⁶ E.g., "From the point of view of literary and critical understanding, it is difficult to understand why poems that are so bad according to almost every criterion of literary value should have held such a central position in the literary culture of their period" (Pearsall, "Understanding Middle English Romance," p. 105).

The distinction I make between works composed in Anglo-Norman dialect and works in continental dialects that were composed or copied in England is based on the division in social experience that Anglo-Norman dialect signals. During the first century following the Conquest, the settlers intermarried with the English, who adapted quickly to Norman rule, and probably raised their children to speak English as their mother tongue and French merely as an I acquired accomplishment.⁷ Just over a century after the Conquest, a royal official remarked that

iam cohabitantibus Anglicis et Normannis et alterutrum uxores ducentibus uel nubentibus, sic permixte sunt nationes ut uix decemi possit hodie, de liberis loquor, quis Anglicus quis Normannus sit genere.

nowadays, when English and Normans live close together and marry and give in marriage to each other, the nations are so mixed that it can scarcely be decided (I mean in the case of the freemen) who is of English birth and who of Norman.”⁸

Anglo-Norman dialect, bilingualism, and artificial preservation of French express the cohesion of the English and Normans and their isolation from the continent. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the dialect’s development shows “the combination of conservatism and neologism that ordinarily characterizes a speech that is severed from its parent stock,” conserving some elements that on the continent had become archaic while creating new forms through the influence of English and irregular contacts with a variety of continental French dialects.⁹ The lower strata of society, by far the majority of the population, clearly did not acquire Anglo-Norman as a second language; rather, the dialect characterized those in power. That it was not a national vernacular no doubt encouraged bilingualism among its speakers. Intermarriage between the continental settlers and the higher strata of English society during the first century after the Conquest also encouraged bilingualism among the powerful.¹⁰

Because Anglo-Norman connoted status and refinement, its users sought consciously to retard its full displacement by English. From quite an early date—perhaps as early as the 1160s—Anglo-Norman had to be deliberately preserved as a “language of culture,” taught to the children of prominent families as the proper medium for social, legal, and literary communication.¹¹ Artificial preservation was inevitably imperfect preservation. Even in the second half of the twelfth century, when the use of Anglo-Norman and the writing of Anglo-Norman romances were at their height, one writer apologizes for her “false French of England”; Walter Map ridicules the impure “Marlborough French” of King Henry’s illegitimate son Geoffrey; and Marie de France and Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, writing in England, call attention to their continental birth. From this period on, Anglo-Norman dialect was derided in French courts, chronicles, and fabliaux.¹² Although in

⁷ Short, “Bilingualism,” summarizes recent research; see also Shelly, *English and French*, pp. 85-88, 94; and Galbraith, “Nationality and Language,” pp. 120-21.

⁸ Richard, Son of Nigel [Richard FitzNeale], *Dialogus de Scaccario*, ed. and trans. Johnson, p. 53; Short, “Bilingualism,” p. 478.

⁹ Pope, *From Latin to Modern French*, p. 425 et passim; Vising, *Dialecte anglo-normand*; Tanqueray, *Evolution du verbe*; and Petit, “Anglo-Norman-English Linguistics.”

¹⁰ Rothwell, “Français en Angleterre”; Clark, “Women’s Names”; Short, “Bilingualism,” pp. 474-79.

¹¹ The designation “language of culture” and the early artificial preservation it implies are discussed by Rothwell, “French in Thirteenth-Century England”; and by Short, “Bilingualism.” See also Lefevre, “Usage du français.”

¹² The Nun of Barking declares, “un faus franceis sai d’ Angleterre,” *Edouard le Confesseur*, ed. Södergård, line 7; Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, pp. 246-47; Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence writes “Mis languages est bons, car en France fui nez,” presumably contrasting his language to the AN around him (quoted and discussed

England's shires this dialect was a mark of power and refinement, from continental perspectives it was a sign of exile and inferiority.

The users of Anglo-Norman, then, were those settlers who had lived for some time in England and their descendants raised in England who were taught the insular dialect of Old French. Just as Anglo-Norman dialect betrays isolation from the continent, romances written in this dialect depart from continental norms and establish insular ones that are continued in Middle English romances. Their difference brought the Anglo-Norman romances little popularity on the continent. Although Old French versions of *Boeve de Haumtone* and *Amis e Amilun* exist, they diverge widely from the Anglo-Norman and allied Middle English versions. Only the few Anglo-Norman romances primarily concerned with love – *Tristan*, *Amadas et Ydoine*, and perhaps *Ipomedon* – gained an audience in France.¹³

In contrast to their limited appeal abroad, virtually every Anglo-Norman romance had a Middle English descendant,¹⁴ constituting a group of some twenty insular romances that have not yet been studied together despite repeated calls for research.¹⁵ I investigate these works' relations to one another in the light of England's particular social, political, and religious structures. To be sure, the life and literature of England generally resemble those of France during this period, yet England's institutional differences resonate significantly with the differences that characterize the insular romances.

Central to my investigation is the history of the barony, those who held land in fief from the king and more often from lesser lords. Two characteristics of the English barony in this period are especially pertinent to the concerns of insular romance. First, the barons' status as members of the second estate, the *bellatores*, was less relevant to their power than was their control of land; thus they are more appropriately defined as a class, however nascent, than as the estate of "men who fight." Many indeed did not fight, while many knights did not manage to become titled landholders. Chivalric ideals were important to the cultural identity of this class, but England's barons also had important economic interests as feudal landholders, and they shared social and political concerns related to their control over agrarian production. Second, the barony's economic and social position deteriorated between 1066 and 1400 in ways that altered their cultural engagement with literature.

The conquerors adapted quickly to an integrated English and Norman life in England, and developed uniquely regular, stabilizing feudal structures there. In contrast to the fragmentation of power and the complicated, often conflicting oaths of fealty that made administration difficult on the continent, William I's power was clear and complete: he claimed all land in England for the crown, then granted land in tenure only.¹⁶ The strength of the early Norman kings, together with a tenure system that was more clearly stratified than those on the continent, favored the peaceful development of a securely landed aristocracy.

Extensive Angevin reforms further distinguished England's baronial life from that of other feudal monarchies. From the time of Henry II, private war was prohibited; all landholders were sworn in fealty to the king no matter whom their immediate oath of fealty bound them to; and an effective system of royal and baronial courts controlled issues of *novel disseisin* and

by Short, "Bilingualism," p. 473). For other evidence of criticism of AN dialect in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Langlois, "Les Anglais du moyen âge"; Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature*, pp. 163-205.

¹³ Legge, "Archaism and the Conquest"; Livingston, "*Roman d'Ipomedon*"; Paris, "Sur *Amadas et Ydoine*."

¹⁴ *Protheselaus* and *Amadas et Ydoine* are exceptions. The ME descendants of *Fouke le Fitz Waryn* and *Waldef* are lost; evidence for them is given in *Fulk Fitz Warine*, ed. Wright, pp. x-xiii; *Johannes Bramis' Historia Regis Waldei*, ed. Imelmann, pp. xxviii-xxxix; Wilson, *Lost Literature*, pp. 112-13, 116.

¹⁵ Kane emphasizes the need for studies of AN influences: "Middle English Scholarship"; see also Dean, "Fair Field."

¹⁶ Good introductory surveys of AN feudalism are R. H. C. Davis, *Normans and Their Myth*, pp. 103-32; and Douglas, *Norman Achievement*.

mort d'ancestor.¹⁷ In these conditions, tensions within the barony and between baronial and royal interests were usually played out in the courts rather than on the battlefield. Conditions were more turbulent in many provinces of France, where in the absence of a functional, effective judicial system, private war remained a right and often the only available means of redress. There the period of transition from feudal organization to the centralized state was one of resistance and loss for the aristocracy.¹⁸ In England barons had fewer privileges to lose to royal power from the first. More significantly, their own impulses were predominantly in consonance with the movement toward the national state. Their wealth was considerable, and their power was dependent not on military strength but on the administration of land; accepting their role as managers and submitting to judicial procedures were for them the means to prosperity rather than painful sacrifices.

The relatively peaceful, even domestic nature of the Anglo-Norman barony derived not only from its particular legal and feudal character but also from its relatively inclusive, flexible organization. Unlike the continental hereditary *noblesse*, this barony “was not yet so rigid that it attempted to exclude the *nouveau riche*, the soldier or the administrator by laying down strict qualifications of blood and birth as conditions of entry.”¹⁹ Moreover, moving out of baronial status was as easy as moving up to it: England’s law of primogeniture “made the development of a *noblesse* impossible in England because it drove younger sons into the ranks of the inferior gentry, into the professions, and even into trade.”²⁰ In these conditions the English barony could not rely on ancestry or title for self-esteem. Power lay in effective administration and service, not in birth alone.

The barony continued to be preoccupied with the control of land and rights under law in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The economic and political power of the class, however, was considerably eroded during this period by royal encroachments on the jurisdiction of baronial courts, by the growth of trade and towns relative to the agricultural sector, and later by famine, plague, and widespread labor unrest.²¹ Mobility characterized the class more and more; careers in law and government became typical routes to gentry standing.²² These factors challenged the barony’s dominance in the later Middle Ages and encouraged the class to draw on sources of status external to its landholding and its more distant warmaking functions. Chivalric ideals, religious and secular orders of knighthood, and “courtly” social behaviors became important sources of justification for the barony’s remaining rights. Literature became a guide to these sources and a model for their execution in life.

The fundamental concept of gentle status survived and continued to incorporate both the high baronage and the newest landholders of some substance. Only in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was this fluid society gradually fixed in defined and stratified ranks, so that

¹⁷ Warren, *Henry II*, pp. 278, 317-61; Painter, “Family.” Particular emphasis is placed on the separate and unique aspects of AN culture by Southern, “England in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance”; Legge, “Precocite”; Barlow, “Effects of the Norman Conquest.”

¹⁸ The long resistance of continental barons to royal attempts to suppress private war and judicial duels, and the inadequacy of continental judicial systems, are outlined in relation to literary history by R. H. Bloch, *Literature and Law*, pp. 63-70, 108-21; see also Cazelles, “Reglementation royale”; Duby, *Région mâconnaise*, pp. 201-3, 569-77.

¹⁹ Holt, *Magna Carta*, p. 26. Perroy contrasts the thirteenth-century English and French nobility in his “Social Mobility.” Duby finds very little class mobility in France’s eleventh and twelfth centuries: see “Enquête”; also M. Bloch, *Société féodale*, II, 73-77.

²⁰ McFarlane, *Nobility*, p. 276. McFarlane modifies this generally accepted formulation (see nn. 22, 23 below) as the barony discovered ways of protecting its interests; still, McFarlane characterizes this barony as an “unformed, almost liquid” class (p. 272). See also Thrupp, *Merchant Class*; Starkey, “Age of the Household.”

²¹ Painter, *English Feudal Barony*, pp. 193-97; McKisack, *Fourteenth Century*, pp. 182-209; Postan, *Mediaeval Economy*, pp. 61-72; Waugh, “Profits of Violence.”

²² McFarlane, *Nobility*, pp. 8-15; Jefferies, “Social Mobility”; Bennett, *Community*.

the peerage, serving in parliament, became clearly superior to the much larger and now subordinate category of gentry.²³ But during most of the fourteenth century, the English barons' identity and concerns evolved directly from those of their Anglo-Norman predecessors. This relationship suggests that the barony constituted the audience for the Middle English adaptations of Anglo-Norman romances.

No one disputes that the Anglo-Norman romances of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries addressed gentle audiences. But Middle English romances have often been assigned bourgeois and peasant audiences, usually because of their language-English instead of Anglo-Norman and because of their limited poetic resources. Some English romances may have had ignoble publics, but those considered in this study probably retained the high audience of their Anglo-Norman antecedents and at the same time extended their appeal to include the newly powerful. This degree of continuity in audience is strongly suggested by the thematic sympathies uniting the insular romances. Moreover, the verbal simplicity and naturalism of the English works need not denote a less sophisticated audience.²⁴ Nor is the use of English a sign of ignoble appeal. There are many indications that even before 1250, knowledge of French was on the decline. Rather than being taught in all gentle families with social aspirations, French gradually became an accomplishment typical only of the highest nobility.²⁵ Before the close of the thirteenth century, *Arthur and Merlin* noted the increasing marginality of French for the barony:

Freynsche vse þis gentilman,	
Ac euerich Inglische Inglische can;	Englishman / knows
Mani noble ich haue yseize, seen	
Pat no Freynsche coupe seye:	
Biginne ichil for her loue	I shall / their
Bi Iesus leue, þat sitt aboue,	
On Inglische tel mi tale. ²⁶	

The modification that the second couplet makes to the first is telling: although French should be or once was a class marker, the fact is that “mani noble” do not have facility in French. For them – the direct antecedent is the nobles, although “euerich Inglische” may also be included – the poet will proceed in English.

Like Anglo-Norman romance, Middle English romance seems to have developed outside the royal courts of England, as the broad range of lesser baronial courts and households were turning from Anglo-Norman bilingualism to English. The literature most naturally suited to the later barony's station and concerns was to be found in Middle English adaptations of the literature of their predecessors, the Anglo-Norman barony.

²³ Prestwich, *Three Edwards*, pp. 137-64; McFarlane, *Nobility*, pp. 268-78; Coss, “Social Terminology”; Saul, *Knights and Esquires*.

²⁴ We know that even the fabliaux had aristocratic audiences (Muscatine, “Social Background”). Against associating naturalism with a middle-class audience, see Gombrich, rev. of *The Social History of Art*.

²⁵ Records of Richard II's books, Thomas, duke of Gloucester's library, and other great lords' wills and purchases testify to the continued use of French in England (R. F. Green, “Richard II's Books”; Scattergood, “Literary Culture”; Strohm, “Chaucer's Audience”). But at the broader level of the barony as a whole, there is much to indicate a shift from bilingualism to an acceptance of English as the only comfortable means of communication: see Blaess, “Abbaye de Bordesley”; and Wilson, “English and French.”

²⁶ *Arthur and Merlin*, lines 23-29. Albert Croll Baugh's work is the most thorough rebuttal of minstrel and oral composition theories; see, e.g., “Middle English Romance.” Ramsey argues that the Middle English (ME) romances had noble audiences in *Chivalric Romances*; and Thrupp's evidence on the libraries of merchants indicates that they were not given to imaginative literature (*Merchant Class*, pp. 161-63, 248-49).

Because I am most interested in describing the historical situation of Anglo-Norman and Middle English works, I avoid basing my discussion on a single generic definition of romance. Genre was not an important concept for medieval theorists, nor did poets restrict the term *roman/romaunce* to one set of characteristics.²⁷ Even the works usually called romances today differ widely; thus insofar as observations about the generic nature of medieval romance can be made, they must be fluid and contingent, seeking to clarify the nature of single works rather than to classify them. Broadly speaking, medieval romances are secular fictions of nobility, “storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse.”²⁸ Romances do not claim to be co-extensive with the contemporary world, as do chronicles, but to reshape and meditate on the world. Like epics, they tell the stories of whole careers; but unlike epics, they do not envision their heroes primarily in service to society’s collective need. Instead, romances contemplate the place of private identity in society at large. Their thematizations of stress and harmony between hero and world make this genre an eminently social one which nonetheless proposes that private identity exists somehow above and apart from collective life.

Insular romances flesh out these generic tendencies with concerns specific to England’s social conditions. As Hans Robert Jauss and others have persuasively argued, generic variations deserve close attention as signs of differing institutional and ideological structures.²⁹ I will examine both kinds of structure here. England’s feudal institutions provided a way of life distinct from that in other feudal territories. The church was making increasingly bold institutional efforts to influence daily behavior. Finally, the cultural power of Angevin royal and French courts affected the development of romance in England. These broad political, religious, and cultural formations generated belief systems that I term ideologies insofar as they sought to justify or alter their generating conditions.³⁰ The English barony developed in its own defense an ideology of right rule, social order, and noble virtue. The insular romances show a consistent awareness of all these interconnecting and conflicting claims to value and power. Romances do not engage in the overt polemicism of ideological arguments; in this sense they are disinterested texts. But they do enact and comment on various confrontations among dominant ideologies in relation to England’s barony.

²⁷ See Strohm, “Middle English *Romaunce*”; Gradon believes “it is doubtful whether the romance can be indeed regarded as a genre at all” (*Form and Style*, p. 269; see also pp. 212-72).

²⁸ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Robinson, *Miller’s Prologue*, 3179. Three stimulating discussions of the genre’s edges from three perspectives (thematic, structural, stylistic) are: Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages*, pp. 219-57; Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance:” in *Essays and Explorations*, pp. 97-128; and Zumthor, *Langue, texte, énigme*, pp. 237-48.

²⁹ “Theorie der Gattungen”; other examples are Kohler, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit*; Duby, ““Jeunes””; and R. H. Bloch, *Literature and Law*. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, similarly historicizes his analyses of postmedieval romances.

³⁰ I do not use “ideology” pejoratively but rather only to describe a set of interrelated beliefs that informs a particular way of life and works to validate that way of life in its attempts to win and maintain a place for itself in the world. Surely no modern reader adheres fully to any medieval ideology, and this is only one of the ways in which medieval literature is difficult of access (see White, *Metahistory*, pp. 5-7, 22-29; Baechler, *Idéologie*).