

Michael Johnston

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ROMANCE AND THE GENTRY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England

By Michael Johnston



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Preface: A Note on Terminology and Methodology

In reading studies of late medieval social history and in talking to literary critics and historians, I have encountered much variation in the use of the term *aristocracy*. Some would limit the term to only king and parliamentary peerage, while others hold that it encompasses the landed gentry. In this study, I adopt the latter, more capacious conception of the aristocracy. In using the term *gentry*, I follow the definition of Susan M. Wright: "Most historians would recognise as gentry, at least from the fifteenth century, those middling county landowners between the parliamentary peerage and the yeomanry. They constituted the core of the gentry, bound to the nobility by a common interest in land, and were part of the nation's landowning élite who lived a life of relative leisure on the profits of their estates. Land was their chief source of income and the basis of their influence, an influence perpetuated by birth, education and lifestyle."¹ Thus, the aristocracy, as I use the term, admits of gradations, with the gentry constituting the lower end of late medieval England's upper tier.

In what follows, I discuss romances and affiliated literary texts as they appear in various manuscripts. To facilitate my readers accessing the texts, I have chosen to cite from critical editions that use the manuscript in question as a base text. In such cases, I also provide the relevant folio numbers from the manuscript itself, and I have checked every edition against the original. When the edition mistranscribes a letter or word, I silently emend. When such an edition does not exist, I cite directly from the manuscript. I preserve the scribe's capitalization, although I alter word spacing to make for an easier read. All the necessary bibliographic information is contained in the notes.

¹ Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Derbyshire Record Society 8 (Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, 1983), 1.

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Abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society
LALME	Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin.
	A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English. 4 vols.
	(Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).
MED	Middle English Dictionary
NIMEV	A New Index of Middle English Verse, ed. Julia Boffey and
	A. S. G. Edwards. (London: British Library, 2005).
PLP	Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, ed. Norman
	Davis. 3 vols. Early English Text Society ss 20–2 (Oxford: Oxford
	University Press, 2004–5). References are to volume, letter
	number, and line number(s).
TNA	The National Archives (formerly PRO: Public Record Office).
VCH Lancs.	Victoria History of the County of Lancaster, ed. William Farrer and
	J. Brownbill. 8 vols. (London: Constable, 1906–14).
VCH Yorks.	Victoria History of the County of York, North Riding, ed. William
	Page. 5 vols. (London: Constable, 1907–74).

A garfaukou*n* for a kynge. A faukou*n* jentyl & a tarselet je*n*tylle for a pryns. A faukou*n* of be roche for a duke. A faukou*n* perygryne for a norle. A basterd for euyry lord. A sakor & a sakorret for a kny3te. A lannyr and a banneret for a squyer. A marlyou*n* for a lady. An hobby for a younge squyer. This byne haukys of be tour bat fleythe frove be lur. There a goshauke for a pour gentyllman. A tersell for a good yomane.

Brogyntyn II.i, fo. 190^r.

Inside Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn II.i (olim Porkington 10), we find this short selection from a treatise on hawking, traditionally attributed to Dame Julia Berners. Brogyntyn II.i is an octavo miscellany containing mostly Middle English with some bits of Latin, likely copied out in the last third of the fifteenth century. This list catalogues what type of birds accord with each social station, offering a virtual ethnography of late medieval England's rural classes-excluding only peasant farmers and cottagers, who made up the vast majority of the population but who were excluded from hunting and hence did not merit a hawk of their own. Beyond Berners's text, Brogyntyn II.i, likely compiled in and for a gentry household, also contains a romance, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle. Berners's text, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, and the manuscript in which they both survive distill the three main concerns of this book: Middle English romance, the gentry, and provincial book production. As I will argue here, romance provided the gentry-late medieval England's emergent social class-with a particularly powerful vehicle for expressing and exploring their unique, and emergent, socioeconomic identity.

Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, for example, argues for the minor, provincial aristocracy's ability to participate as full-fledged members of England's governing class. I examine this romance in Chapter 2, wherein I show that the Carl is a gentry landowner, one whose courtesy and ability to effect largesse rival that of the Arthurian court. The emissaries of

that court initially assume that this rural landowner is too boorish to participate in refined courtly rituals, which makes the Carl's ultimate exposition of refinement all the more triumphant. The more that both Arthur's knights and the text's reader underestimate the Carl's aristocratic credentials, that is, the greater the effect of his unveiling at the end—the joke is on us all for misjudging the Carl's liberality.

Brogyntyn II.i was likely produced and consumed in the same region: somewhere in a small area bounded by central Worcestershire and eastern Herefordshire. We do not know for whom this manuscript was produced or exactly where it was copied out, but a surviving name scribbled at the foot of fo. 52^v, "H. Hattun," suggests a connection to the village of that name in southeastern Shropshire,¹ quite close to the home of the two scribes responsible for *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*.² Thus

¹ This name is clearly contemporaneous with the manuscript, though I am not in agreement with the suggestions of Auvo Kurvinen, "MS. Porkington 10: Description with Extracts," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 54 (1953): 36, or Daniel Huws, "MS Porkington 10 and Its Scribes," in Jennifer Fellows et al., eds., Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 205, that this H. Hattun is himself Scribe M; it seems more likely that he was an early reader who inscribed his name in the volume. Nevertheless, Hatton is the name of a village in northeastern Shropshire, about thirty miles north of the likely dialect home of the main scribe of Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle. I have identified a great number of families from southeastern Shropshire who derived their patronym from this village (though the first initial "H" from the manuscript precludes any positive identification with the person who signed Brogyntyn II.i). See e.g. Calendar of Probate and Administration Acts, 1407-1541, and Abstracts of Wills, 1541–1581, in the Court Books of the Bishop of Hereford, ed. M. A. Faraday and E. J. L. Cole, British Record Society 2 (London: British Record Society, 1989), 4, 178, 276; Lichfield Wills and Administrations, 1516-1652, ed. W. P. W. Phillimore, British Record Society 7 (London: British Record Society, 1892), 48, 51, 53, 56, 57, 59; and The Lay Subsidy for Shropshire, 1524-27, ed. M. A. Faraday, Shropshire Record Series 3 (Keele, Staffordshire: Centre for Local History, 1999), 133, 165, 167, 168, 392, 434, 447, 588, 596, 633, 634, 641. Given the numerous Hattons in this region, I think it unnecessary to look to so far afield as Cheshire for the possible identity of this H. Hattun, as Huws, "MS Porkington 10," 205, does. A facsimile of the manuscript is available online at , accessed October 2013.

² Scribe J, responsible for copying the opening 514 lines of *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* (fos. 12[:]-22[']), can be shown to hail from an area bounded by central Worcestershire and central/eastern Herefordshire. Combining the data from the Dot Maps in *LALME* for the following words shows that the scribe is from an area bounded by Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, and Herefordshire: It: hit (Dot Map 24); Many: mony (Map 91); Will: woll (Map 164); If: yefe (yeyf) (Map 209); and Came: came (cam) (Map 381). Reference to the Item Maps for the following words narrows the potential range down to central Worcestershire or central/eastern Herefordshire: She: sche; Much: moche (meche); If: yefe (yeyf); Eyes (pl.): yghen; Two: to. The potential location of this scribe's dialect goes as far east as Grid 390 and as far west as Grid 360; as far north as Grid 270, and as far south as Grid 240. His linguistic profile is a relatively close match to LP 7300, 7340 and 7481, all from this region. See also Tauno F. Mustanoja, ed., *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women*, Annales Academiz Scientiarum Fennicæ B 61.2 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden

this romance, as well as Berners's hunting text, survives in a manuscript that was likely produced and circulated in the same region of the southwest Midlands. There is nothing about this codex to indicate that there was much money put into its commission—quite the opposite, in fact. Its plain, unadorned appearance and copying by numerous scribes who trade off stints often seemingly at random suggest production within the informal milieu of a household, along the lines of the well-known Findern Anthology or the Heege Manuscript, both of which were also produced for provincial landowners, as I detail in Chapter 4. Like these two manuscripts, then, the household of the minor aristocracy forms the most likely explanation for where Brogyntyn II.i was born and spent its early years.

Like *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, Berners's list of hawks would also have appealed to such a household, for it reflects a remarkably current awareness of the social nomenclature of England's provincial elite. In particular, this manuscript's version of Berners's text attests a layering to the aristocracy. Those who are aristocratic but not noble—the gentry—are here divided into knights, esquires, and "pour gentyllm[e]n," with yeomen just on the outside looking in, social divisions that had come into focus only in the late fourteenth century. In fact, it was not until 1415–40, a generation before the production of Brogyntyn II.i, that the term *gentleman* was widely applied to those populating a distinct stratum at the lower margins of the aristocracy.³

This manuscript presents a particularly 'gentry-centric' version of Berners's text in that its recording of *gentleman* is a textual corruption—a corruption that renders the text more familiar to readers of Brogyntyn II.i. Where Brogyntyn II.i's version offers a socially current hierarchy of knight–squire–gentleman–yeoman, most texts record knight–squire– young man–poor man–yeoman: gentlemen, that is, are nowhere to be

Seuran, 1948), 134, who analyzes the dialect of *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*, which was also copied out by Scribe J (fos. 135^v–138^v), concluding that "It may not be unreasonable to assign the surviving copy of *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* to the Central West Midlands." Though the dialect evidence for Scribe K, responsible for copying the end of *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, is too exiguous to allow any precise localization, his forms in general accord with Scribe J, indicating that he was from the same region. In calling these scribes J and K, I follow the identification of scribal stints in Kurvinen, "MS. Porkington 10."

³ Philippa Maddern, "Gentility," in Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, eds., *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 23. See also Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45–7; and T. B. Pugh, "The Magnates, Knights, and Gentry," in S. B. Chrimes, C. D. Ross, and R. A. Griffiths, eds., *Fifteenth Century England 1399–1509: Studies in Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester: University Press, 1972), 96.

found in other editions.⁴ This corruption—by its inclusion of *gentlemen* among those privileged to hunt—maps onto its readers' social reality more precisely than did the other versions, which omit men of this station. In late medieval England, *knight* had emerged as a title for the highest stratum of gentry landowners, followed by *esquire*, followed by *gentleman*. Yeomen were not part of the aristoracy. In the version of Berners's text preserved in Brogyntyn II.i, each of these contemporary social classes is assigned its own unique hawk.

Such nomenclature was, as I noted, quite current. It is now an accepted truism among historians that the middle and end of the fourteenth century witnessed a shift in the make-up of England's aristocracy. During this period, the gentry, which comprised the knights, esquires, and gentlemen of aristocratic society, emerged as a distinct caste at the lower end of the aristocracy, separated from the titled nobility above them and the yeomen and franklins below. It is the central contention of this book that, as this social class "crystallised" in this period, to borrow a phrase of Peter Coss, England's literary culture was indelibly affected as a result.⁵ A new class emerged, numbering in the thousands, almost universally literate and with the necessary means to procure literary texts, becoming aware of themselves as occupying a unique social position—and romance, in particular, stepped in to fill the cultural needs of such readers. But literary and cultural history have not yet accounted for this seismic shift in English society.

THE GENTRY, ROMANCE, AND MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION

Hitherto, disciplinary boundaries have caused us to miss the contemporaneous and mutually influencing developments of late Middle English romance, late-medieval manuscript circulation, and the emergence of the gentry. Some of the foremost historians of the gentry, for example, have

⁴ David Scott-Macnab, ed., A Sporting Lexicon of the Fifteenth Century: The "J. B. Treatise," Medium Ævum Monographs NS 23 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2003). Scott-Macnab's critical apparatus reveals that only one other manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 196) mentions gentlemen; The Boke of St Albans, printed in 1486, does not mention gentlemen, either. See English Hawking and Hunting in "The Boke of St Albans": A Facsimile Edition of Sigs. a2–f8 of "The Boke of St Albans" (1486), ed. Rachel Hands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 55. See also William Marx, The Index of Middle English Prose: Handlist XIV: Manuscripts in the National Library of Wales (Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru), Aberystwyth (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 20–7.

⁵ *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 239.

argued that there was no literature specifically about or for this class an assertion that, I believe, cannot stand, given the appeals to the gentry contained in the romances I will examine here and the reception of such texts primarily among gentry households.⁶ Historians have tended to read a rather thin selection of literature, though, looking predominantly to Chaucer, Langland, and Malory as representative of Middle English literature as a whole. But when we turn to a romance such as *Sir Degrevant*, one of the gentry romances that will feature heavily in what follows, we get a much different picture of late medieval England's literary culture. This romance's central character owns a minor estate and defends his property rights against the encroachment of a neighboring earl. Such a text makes specific appeals to the gentry and performs cultural work for this particular class. The only owners of this romance that we know of—Robert Thornton and the Findern family—were both, not coincidentally, members of this very social stratum.

Conversely, literary scholars have paid little attention to the recent flurry of studies of the gentry, which have confirmed that this social class emerged in the middle-late fourteenth century to shape the politics and economics of provincial society. The existence of thousands of cultural consumers newly aware of themselves as a distinct category within England's elite has been almost completely ignored by contemporary literary historians.⁷ One signal attempt to understand the literary culture of the gentry is Raluca Radulescu's *The Gentry Context for Malory's "Morte Darthur*," which examines how the gentry's political values underlie and animate Malory's text. Radulescu, for example, analyzes a number of books owned by the gentry, drawing attention in particular to this class's interest in chronicles and

⁶ E.g. Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, 48, suggests that if Chaucer and Langland "were perhaps a little recherché for most landowners, there is plenty of more 'popular' chivalric literature, but it contains few role models for the provincial owners of estates, clients of the nobility and officers of the crown and the courts who made up the bulk of gentle society." Likewise Elizabeth Noble, *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 196, claims that "Chivalric and martial romances may have provided popular reading among the gentry, but they neither mirrored nor mentioned the gentry's own lives." See also Gerald Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England*, *1360–1461* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 159–60. In the last several years, historians and literary scholars have made a salutary turn to the literary and cultural interests of this class. See e.g. Peter Coss, *The Foundations of Gentry Life: The Multons of Frampton and Their World*, *1270–1370* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 230–56; Deborah Youngs, *Humphrey Newton* (*1466–1536*): An Early Tudor Gentleman (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008); and Radulescu and Truelove, eds., *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*.

⁷ For a noteworthy exception, see the brief remarks of Ralph Hanna, "Literature and the Cultural Elites," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124–9.

genealogical texts.⁸ In my analysis, I seek both to complement and extend Radulescu's work. Radulescu pays particular attention to the gentry's concern for counsel and good governance, which are the central issues Malory takes up in *Le Morte D'arthur*. My argument will focus less on the concerns of the gentry *vis-à-vis* governance and central authority, and more on the quotidian concerns that were fundamental to their class identity: running an estate, for example, or ensuring an adequate inheritance for younger sons. When we expand our critical gaze beyond Malory, to romances such as *Octavian* or *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, we see the broader concerns of the gentry broached within literature. While Radulescu's study draws primarily on political history on the national level, mine turns to socioeconomic history on the local level to recover and reconstruct the ideological concerns of the gentry.

Much of the evidence for romance's affiliations with the gentry lies in the manuscripts—both their production and provenance. Yet to date, the studies offering the most penetrating insight into the ideological work romance can perform have said little about the audience's role in shaping such work, largely ignoring manuscript evidence.⁹ Likewise, there exist a number of excellent surveys of romance manuscripts, yet each survey, almost as a rule, says very little about the meanings of romance within the context of reception, sticking instead to observations about codicology and provenance.¹⁰ To wit, James Simpson recently commented that "In

⁸ The Gentry Context for Malory's "Morte Darthur," Arthurian Studies 55 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003); see also Radulescu, "The Political Mentality of the Gentry at the End of the Fifteenth Century," New Europe College Yearbook 8 (2000–1): 363–74; Radulescu, "Gentry Readers of the Brut and Genealogical Material," Trivium 36 (2006): 189–202; and Hyonjin Kim, The Knight without the Sword: A Social Landscape of Malorian Chivalry, Arthurian Studies 45 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000).

⁹ See e.g. Patricia Clare Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Christine Chism, Alliterative Revivals (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Geraldine Heng, Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Helen Cooper, The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Gisela Guddat-Figge, Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1976); Karl Brunner, "Middle English Romances and Their Audience," in Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 219–28; Harriet Hudson, "Middle English Popular Romances: The Manuscript Evidence," Manuscripta 28/2 (1984): 67–78; Carol Meale, "gode men / Wiues maydnes and alle men': Romance and Its Audiences," in Meale, ed., Readings in Medieval English Romance (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 209–26; John J. Thompson, "Collecting Middle English Romance and Some Related Book-Production Activities in the Later Middle Ages," in Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale, eds., Romance in Medieval England (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 17–38; P. R. Robinson, "A Study of Some Aspects of the Transmission of English Verse Texts the field of Middle English, paleographers and codicologists for the most part stick to paleography and codicology. They provide an invaluable service industry, but themselves eschew the translation of their findings into literary criticism and cultural history."11 Though Simpson's remarks may no longer apply to the study of Chaucer, Langland, or Middle English religious literature-each of which has seen a profitable turn to manuscript studies of late-they do still accurately reflect the state of romance studies, where a rather solid boundary separates studies steeped in cultural history from studies engaging heavily with manuscripts. This present book is indebted to the insights yielded by the recent turn to book history in various fields of Middle English studies, and I hope to bring such insights to bear on an understanding of romance.¹² Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England also bears the heavy, though often unacknowledged, footprint of several recent studies of literary culture, not exclusively devoted to Middle English, that have interrogated manuscripts, placing them at the center of cultural history.¹³ Ultimately, I intend that this study bring Middle English romance into step with such recent, innovative critical work, which has shown how mutually illuminating manuscript studies and cultural history can be. I thus envision this book as a response to

in Late Mediaeval Manuscripts" (B.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1972); and Maldwyn Mills, "The Manuscripts of Popular Romance," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 49–57. One notable exception, which synthesizes codicological and literary-critical analyses, is Linda Olson, "Romancing the Book: Manuscripts for 'Euerich Inglische'," in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 95–151.

¹¹ Rev. of *London Literature, 1300–1380*, by Ralph Hanna, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28 (2006): 292.

¹² John Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2007); Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise L. Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce "Piers Plowman,"* Medieval Cultures 15 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹³ Andrew Taylor, Textual Situations: Three Medieval Manuscripts and Their Readers (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2006); John Dagenais, The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the "Libro de buen amor" (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Daniel Hobbins, Authorship and Publicity before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Murray Evans's provocative call for analyses of romance that synthesize manuscript studies and literary criticism.¹⁴

By isolating individual manuscripts of the gentry and their romances, my book also situates this genre within what Ralph Hanna has called "local sitedness." By this term, Hanna refers to the sui generis and inherently local nature of manuscripts. Each medieval book was produced under unique circumstances, and such factors as a book's paper stocks, collation, textual ordering, scribal dialect, and early provenance reveal its unique make-up and cultural resonances. As a result, each book offers its own literary-historical narrative, thereby obstructing literary history's impulse towards a totalizing "master narrative." As Hanna comments, "Book history, then, may generate information capable of prioritizing diverse notions of local literary community."15 Each of the manuscripts I address is its own unique artifact, revealing a distinct set of interpretative parameters for romance, exemplifying Hanna's insight. When located in the context of its production and early ownership, each romance becomes part of a distinct "local literary community." To this end, I will situate each romance within what I have reconstructed about its original readers and producers. Thus, the household of, for example, the Finderns in southwestern Derbyshire, or the Irelands in southwestern Lancashire, form distinct literary communities for the reception of romance. But in addition to stressing the individuality of each romance situation, my analysis will also highlight their broad affinities, for all the acts of compiling and reading I discuss took place during the period of the gentry's emergence and all such manuscripts preserve what I will call gentry romances. Thus, all these manuscripts, though each unique, together attest to diverse, but ultimately affiliated, forms of cultural practice.

As I hope to show throughout what follows, when we turn to the manuscripts of late Middle English romance, we find deep connections between this genre and the emergent gentry. Romance developed a series of new topoi, which I outline in Chapter 2, that responded to the socioeconomic concerns of this class. The preponderance of such texts survives in manuscripts with connections to English provincial households; that

¹⁴ "Manuscript Studies: New Directions for Appreciating Middle English Romance," in John Simons, ed., *From Medieval to Medievalism* (New York: St Martin's, 1992), 8–23.

¹⁵ "Middle English Books and Middle English Literary History," *Modern Philology* 102/2 (2005): 174. See also Hanna and A. S. G. Edwards, "Rotheley, the De Vere Circle, and the Ellesmere Chaucer," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58/1 (1996): 11–12; and Hanna, "Notes toward a Future History of Middle English Literature: Two Copies of Richard Rolle's *Form of Living*," in Geoffrey Lester, ed., *Chaucer in Perspective: Middle English Essays in Honour of Norman Blake* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 279–300.

is, in these new romances that were composed during the emergence of the gentry, we find that both the *audience* and *public*—to borrow Anne Middleton's formulation from her discussion of *Piers Plowman*—are often the same: England's provincial landowners. By *audience*, Middleton means those readers who can be shown to have owned, read, bequeathed, or cited Langland's text. By *public*, Middleton refers to the text's own conception of its readership—those with whom the author imagines his poem to be engaging in a dialogue. There is a tendency to draw a hard and fast line between these two groups, for *audience* may seem objectively verifiable, while *public* is subjective, dependent on how we read Langland's text. But as Middleton remarks, "the more closely one approaches either question in detail, the more spurious does this way of formulating the distinction between them become. They are, rather, complementary and reciprocal processes."16 Likewise, it is my contention that the *audience* and *public* of the gentry romances are "complementary and reciprocal" -and in what follows I maintain Middleton's distinction between these two terms. In Chapter 2, I will argue that the *public* of these texts was indeed the minor aristocracy of provincial England. In the chapters following, as we turn to consider the manuscripts in which these texts survive, we shall see that their audience was composed of the gentry, and those aspiring to gentry status.

My study returns to Stephen Knight's earlier argument—one he registered in 1986, long before critical interest in popular romances was invigorated—that this genre serves an audience composed of "those who actually controlled the economic and social relations of the feudal mode of production, landlords and their families," as well as "people who were not in positions of power but accepted the values of those who were."¹⁷ I would only wish slightly to alter Knight's assertion, for the gentry romances came to serve the cultural needs of a particular niche of emergent readers: England's minor aristocracy. Marginally aristocratic though they were, the gentry whom we know to have owned romances, like the Finderns, the Irelands, or Robert Thornton, participated in highly developed social rituals, intended to mark them off as part of the aristocracy: heraldry; positions of privilege in the parish church; service to the county as sheriffs,

¹⁶ "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman,'" in David Lawton, ed., *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background: Seven Essays* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 101.

¹⁷ "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," in David Aers, ed., *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (New York: St Martin's, 1986), 101. See also Ad Putter, Introduction to Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 4–7; and Derek Brewer, "The Popular English Metrical Romances," in Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Companion to Romance: Classical to Contemporary* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 45.

escheators, JPs, or tax collectors; and the running of the manorial court, where they collected rents and enforced feudal dues. All of this added up to the gentry being different *in kind* from the great masses of yeomen, franklins, merchants, village priests, and peasant farmers below. Christine Carpenter phrases it most succinctly: "All the gentry were differentiated from those below them by their life-style and aspirations and above all by the fact of their lordship over men."¹⁸ The gentry's ideology was fundamentally a conservative one. They sought to consolidate their position as men of import in a very circumscribed rural world. As part of the governing and landowning elite, they ran the show in their respective corners of England.

LATE MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION

The gentry's romances spoke to the concerns of rural landowners, but they also were often copied in the vicinity of their gentry owners. Thus, in this book I posit a very tight connection between the gentry and their literature, in terms of both subject matter and forms of production. As I argue in Chapter 3, book production within the household accounts for most of the surviving gentry romances. Gentry men such as Robert Thornton copied out their own manuscripts. Other families, such as the Irelands, likely commissioned a scribe—one who, based on dialect, can be located to the region where this gentry family lived. The romances I identify as particularly pointed at the gentry, then, are largely a provincial literature: made in the provinces for the provincial elite, predominantly addressing the concerns of such an elite readership.

In any analysis of vernacular manuscript culture, one must keep in mind the question of private reading vs. aural recitation.¹⁹ Of course, most

¹⁸ Locality and Polity, 615.

¹⁹ Ad Putter, "Middle English Romances and the Oral Tradition," in Karl Reichl, ed., *Medieval Oral Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 335–51; Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 179–220; Nancy Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud: Storytelling in Late Medieval England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 1–21; Karl Reichl, "Orality and Performance," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Radulescu and Rushton, 132–49; George Shuffelton, "Is There a Minstrel in the House?: Domestic Entertainment in Late Medieval England," *Philological Quarterly* 87/1–2 (2008): 51–76; Murray McGillivray, *Memorization in the Transmission of the Middle English Romances* (New York: Garland, 1990); Andrew Taylor, "The Myth of the Minstrel Manuscript," *Speculum* 66/1 (1991): 53–60; and Taylor, "Fragmentation, Corruption, and Minstrel Narration: The Question of the Middle English Romances," *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 38–62.

manuscripts yield little evidence of how they were encountered by their original audiences, though it seems likely that the manuscripts I examine here could facilitate both sorts of reception. Certainly, numerous Middle English romances invoke an aural reception environment in their openings, which at least suggests that such must have happened from time to time. However, the most important point for the discussions that follow is that these romances found a home among the gentry and thus came to comprise a portion of their entertainment. Thus, although I will often refer to the *readers* of such romances, I intend that this term refer broadly to both private readers and public listeners.

Each book produced within any given household was, by its very nature, sui generis-that is, households did not typically produce a multitude of books, since such books were only to be used for a limited range of readers within the domestic space. As such, within any individual manuscript, the idiosyncrasies of the scribe(s) loom large, for provincial scribes-compared to those working in the concentrated copying activity of London, or those working in an institutional setting such as a religious house-were working in relative isolation with less practice at literary production. Thus, for example, in the Findern Manuscript or the Thornton Manuscripts, we find great inconsistency in the *mise-en-page*, while Rate, the scribe of Ashmole 61, has drawn a series of fish and flowers and has inscribed his name throughout his volume. Such sui generity greatly limits the broad, overarching claims we can make about provincial book production as a whole. By comparison, we have, in the last thirty years, learned a great deal about commercial book production in London, primarily because we have a large and diverse pool of evidence. Stationers worked in close proximity to one another. Scribes worked in teams. Scribes also served as correctors. Scribes shared exemplars among themselves. The names of scribes survive, some of whom had a hand in multiple manuscripts.²⁰ All this is well known to medievalists today, but such knowledge is made possible by the concentrated book production efforts that took place in London, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. By contrast, the one-off sorts of manuscripts produced in a provincial household do not leave us with such an array of evidence. Very few, if any, of the gentry romances have ties to London production. In that regard, most of these books fall into that rather large grey area in our knowledge of late medieval book production-books produced outside London or a religious house by

²⁰ These scribes are catalogued in Linne Mooney, Simon Horobin, and Estelle Stubbs, *Late Medieval English Scribes*, http://www.medievalscribes.com, accessed October 2013.

non-commercial scribes, what Michael Sargent calls "the non-centralized production of non-canonized books."²¹

Regardless of the difficulties in assessing the production of any individual manuscript of gentry romance, it is clear that changes in the nature of book production in the late fourteenth century greatly facilitated the gentry's ability to produce and/or procure literary texts of any kind. The number of books being produced had greatly increased in England by the later Middle Ages: 1400 was something of a watershed in book production, in both London and in more remote locales. The number of vernacular literary texts from the fifteenth century dwarfs the previous century, and the majority of Middle English romances survive only in fifteenth-century manuscripts.²² Part of this is, no doubt, due to the accidents of survival, as older manuscripts are more apt to have been destroyed. But the overall increase in vernacular book production in this period is incontrovertible.

Households of the gentry benefited from some of the revolutions in book production that marked the end of the fourteenth century. (The nine manuscripts I discuss in this book date from roughly 1400–1500.) We know, for example, that provincial households were producing vernacular literary texts well before the period I take up in this book. The famous Harley 2253, as well as Digby 86, both attest to production of manuscripts for the households of the minor aristocracy in provincial England about a century before my period.²³ By the fifteenth century, several changes in book production

²¹ "What Do the Numbers Mean? A Textual Critic's Observations on Some Patterns of Middle English Manuscript Transmission," in Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney, eds., *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2008), 244.

²² See H. S. Bennett, "The Production and Dissemination of Vernacular Manuscripts in the Fifteenth Century," *The Library* 5th ser. 1/3–4 (1946): 167–78; A. I. Doyle, "English Books in and out of Court from Edward III to Henry VII," in V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne, eds., *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: St Martin's, 1983), 163–81; A. S. G. Edwards and Derek Pearsall, "The Manuscripts of the Major English Poetic Texts," in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Book Production and Publishing in Britain*, *1375–1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 257– 78; and Eltjo Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West: Explorations with a Global Database*, Global Economics History Series 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 369–95 and Annex C.

²³ On Harley 2253, see Susanna Fein, ed., Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000); and Susanna Fein, "Compilation and Purpose in MS Harley 2253," in Wendy Scase, ed., Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 67–94. On Digby 86, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, "Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86: A Thirteenth-Century Commonplace Book in Its Social Context," in R. G. Eales and Shaun Tyas, eds., Family and Dynasty in Late Medieval England: Proceedings of the 1997 Harlaxton Symposium (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2003), 56–66; and Marilyn Corrie, "Harley 2253, Digby 86, and the Circulation of Literature in Pre-Chaucerian England," in Studies in the Harley Manuscript, 427–43. allowed the model accounting for the Harley and Digby Manuscripts to be adopted by a much wider swath of the English provincial elite. First, paper had begun to supplant parchment, making book production cheaper and supplies more readily available. R. J. Lyall estimates that by 1450 about 20 percent of English books were copied on paper and that fully half were by the end of the century.²⁴ It should be noted that manuscripts containing romance were ahead of the curve here, for, of the nine manuscripts I take up, six are exclusively on paper, one is almost entirely paper with a few parchment leaves, and only two are exclusively copied on parchment.

The second fundamental development that put book production conveniently in the hands of the provincial elite was the technology of booklets.²⁵ In short, booklets are a set of self-contained fascicles that could circulate independently, only subsequently being bound up with other fascicles. A scribe working on commission, with his exemplars immediately at hand, often had no need to make independent fascicles, for he could copy his text straight through. Commercial scribes producing codices such as the Auchinleck Manuscript or the Trinity College Gower Manuscript may have worked on independent fascicles as a means of facilitating division of labor and thus economizing time, but such manuscripts were produced in a short window.²⁶ For these commercial scribes, booklets did not exist as independent units for any substantial amount of timejust until the copying was completed. But those creating books without access to exemplars often had to rely upon booklets left unfinished for long periods of time, a process that allowed them to keep a relatively flexible order to their texts until further suitable exemplars became available. They often did not know what texts they might later come upon, so by using booklets such scribes did not have to commit to a final form for the book. Having several booklets going at once allowed scribes to slot like

²⁴ "Materials: The Paper Revolution," in Griffiths and Pearsall, eds., *Book Production* and Publishing in Britain, 12. See also Erik Kwakkel, "A New Type of Book for a New Type of Reader: The Emergence of Paper in Vernacular Book Production," *The Library* 7th ser. 4 (2003): 219–48; and Uwe Nedderemeyer, *Von der Handschrift zum gedruckten Buch: Schriftlichkeit und Leseinteresse im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit: Quantitative und qualitative Aspekte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), ii. 644.

²⁵ For a discussion of booklets in manuscripts, see P. R. Robinson, "The Booklet': A Self-Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts," *Codicologica* 3 (1980): 46–69; Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 21–34; and Erik Kwakkel, "Towards a Terminology for the Analysis of Composite Manuscripts," *Gazette du livre médiéval* 41 (2002): 12–19.

of Composite Manuscripts," *Gazette du livre médiéval* 41 (2002): 12–19. ²⁶ Timothy A. Shonk, "A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Bookmaking in the Early Fourteenth Century," *Speculum* 60/1 (1985): 71–91; A. I. Doyle and M. B. Parkes, "The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century," in M. B. Parkes and A. G. Watson, eds., *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts, and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker* (London: Scolar, 1978), 163–210.

texts alongside like and thus to maintain some sort of thematic coherence to their creations.²⁷ With booklet production, romance scribes such as Robert Thornton or Richard Heege did not have to commit to any sort of textual ordering from the beginning. They could assemble their books piecemeal, on the lookout for exemplars of romance (or any other text) that piqued their interest. Such a technology thus enabled those in the provinces, removed from regular access to exemplars, the ability to make miscellaneous manuscripts over a protracted period of time. They did not have to be romance enthusiasts, but rather could insert a romance or two into a miscellany of lyrics and courtly poetry, as the Finderns did, or into a miscellaneous volume of didactic and scientific treatises, as we find in Brogyntyn II.i. Alternatively, booklet production allowed some scribes to keep their romances in a separate part of their manuscript from other sorts of texts, as we find with a scribe such as Robert Thornton or the scribe of Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38.

So, at the same moment in England, great changes were afoot that fundamentally altered the nation's cultural landscape. The gentry were emerging into a distinct and quite numerous stratum within the aristocracy. Romance adapted to this change, opening up a new ideological space for this new class of readers. And book production simultaneously underwent drastic changes, conveniently facilitating provincial copying and circulation of provincially oriented texts. These three simultaneous developments coalesced to yield a new type of romance: what I will hereafter call the gentry romance. What emerges from this discussion is that romance was a malleable genre, adapting to speak to the emergent concerns of the gentry.

In Chapter 1, I turn to the history of the gentry, making the case that this class emerged in the mid–late fourteenth century and had unique sociocultural concerns, distinct from the nobility above them and the yeomen, franklins, and merchants below them. In Chapter 2 I turn to the romances themselves, examining how nine romances, all composed during the emergence of the gentry and surviving in fifteenth-century manuscripts, specifically addressed the concerns of this class. In Chapter 3, I look at the manuscripts themselves, surveying the nine miscellanies in which the majority of these nine gentry romances survive. As I show there, most of them were produced and owned in the same vicinity—produced, that is, for, and likely often within, the gentry household.

²⁷ Ralph Hanna, "Miscellaneity and Vernacularity: Conditions of Literary Production in Late Medieval England," in Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel, eds., *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 37–51.

The final chapters take up close readings of particular compilations of gentry romances. Chapter 4 considers two manuscripts connected to landowners in Derbyshire. For the Finderns, who owned Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.1.6, Sir Degrevant offered an imaginative resolution to the labyrinthine land disputes occupying them when this romance was being copied into their manuscript. For the Sherbrookes, a family of yeomen who owned Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1, romance offered a gilded ideal of what life would be like among the aristocracy. Chapter 5 turns to the well-known Lincoln Thornton Manuscript. I argue there that Robert Thornton's compilation of romances offered him a space in which difficult entanglements with his social betters-one of the markers of Thornton's biography-are easily overcome by the gentry hero's prowess. In the final chapter, I turn to the Ireland Manuscript, owned by the Ireland family of Hale in southwestern Lancashire. This manuscript's romances make the case for gentry participation in aristocratic economics. Two of its romances, in particular, present the gentry as able to give just as liberally as the nobility. But bound up with the family's romances are contemporaneous notes from their manorial court. Such notes, I argue, demystify the aristocratic ideals subtending the romances. These notes, that is, show the family, like every gentry family, to be exceptionally concerned about accounting, trying to squeeze every last bit of rent out of the tenants on their manors. In the end, these notes reveal the romances with which they were bound up as ideological posturing. The book concludes, then, with a brief appendix, which lists the nine gentry romances and all the manuscripts in which they survive, thereby showing just how frequently these romances circulated in such provincial miscellanies.

CRAFTING A GENTRY IMAGINARY

As I will argue throughout what follows, these new romances, composed in the period of the gentry's emergence, created a niche for the gentry within romance, the genre most closely affiliated with the aristocracy. By opening up such a space, romance underwrote the gentry's emergence, reassuring such readers that they belonged to the upper echelons of society. In this vein, the gentry romances can be placed alongside other social practices that likewise assured the gentry of local preeminence: their adoption of coats of arms; their employment in service to the crown on the county level as sheriffs, escheators, coroners, JPs, Knights of the Shire, or tax collectors; their use of social titles (knight, esquire, gentleman); and their function as local luminaries in the running of manorial courts. All such practices, which devolved to the gentry primarily in this period, served—like the romances—as a reinforcement of the gentry's social credentials during this moment of their emergence, when their position was necessarily tenuous.

The gentry romances are particularly partisan in their appeals. Socially conservative homilists and sumptuary laws notwithstanding, medieval social boundaries could be extremely porous, and cultural practice similarly could encourage the spread of literary texts beyond the authors' intended class bounds.²⁸ Though the gentry forms the primary readership of these romances, we find both yeomen and urban merchants preserving such texts, as well. The gentry romances thus offer their readers from a broad spectrum of English society an ideal in which the reader is encouraged to identify with the gentry's socioeconomic concerns, thereby crafting a gentry imaginary—for the first time in English literature. In Chapter 3 I address two manuscripts with likely connections to Leicester and trade. As I show in both cases, the manuscripts that house the gentry romances also house texts aimed at a mercantile public. For such a readership, the romances-with their equation of landowning and power-reinforced for the non-aristocratic readers that power resided in the gentry, who owned the land. Many merchants, as we know, sought to own land and thus to develop a lifestyle imitative of the gentry, and the urban segment of society developed a social nomenclature (knight, esquire, and gentleman) derived from their rural counterparts. Likewise, in Chapter 4 we will encounter one manuscript owned by a family of yeomen, outside the aristocracy. Many of their non-romance texts address the specific concerns of this class of sub-gentry readers. At the same time, their romances encode the desire for social improvement-a desire this family would attempt to fulfill as they moved the family seat from Derbyshire to Nottinghamshire, never managing to enter the ranks of the gentry during the Middle Ages. In all these cases, then, the gentry formed an ideal for late medieval social thought. The romances thus incarnate a gentry imaginary, one that exerted a powerful pull on those outside of gentility, as well.

We know that late medieval England's socioeconomic system had a fuzzy border separating city and country, and separating aristocracy and commoners. Knightly and mercantile families intermarried. The king could ennoble a commoner. John Fastolf, never ennobled, had wealth that

²⁸ D. W. Robertson, "Who Were 'The People'?" in Thomas J. Heffernan, ed., *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, Tennessee Studies in Literature 28 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 3–29; and Georges Duby, "The Diffusion of Cultural Patterns in Feudal Society," *Past & Present* 39 (1968): 3–10.