



Expectations of Romance

*The Reception of a Genre
in Medieval England*

MELISSA FURROW

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Medieval readers, like modern ones, differed in whether they saw “noble storie, and worthie for to drawen to memorie,” or “drasty rymyng, nat worth a toord.” This book tackles the task of discerning what were the medieval expectations of the genre in England: the evidence, and the implications. Safe for monastic, trained readers, romances provided moral examples. But not all readers saw that role as valid, desirable, or to the point, and not all readers were monks.

Working from what was central to medieval readers’ concept of the genre from the twelfth century onward, the book sees the changing linguistic, literary, religious and political contexts through such heterogeneous lenses as Denis Piramus, Robert Manning, and Walter Map; *Guy of Warwick* and Guenevere; *chansons de geste* and *fabliaux*; Tristram and Isolde and John Gower’s uses of the pair as exemplary; Geoffrey Chaucer as reader and writer of romance; and the Lollards, clergy, and didacts of the fifteenth century.

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The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England

MELISSA FURROW

D. S. BREWER

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The Problem with Romance

Reception of a Genre

This book grows out of a simple question: “What did medieval readers think of romances?” That simple question is immediately bedevilled by another – “what did medieval readers think *were* romances?” – for as scholars in the field well know, medieval writers did not use labels for different genres the way that modern critics do. The simplicity of the question also calls for some amplification. “Readers” will have to be short-hand for “readers and hearers” since there is no way to determine whether some of the allusions, uses, and interpretations discussed in this book come from the minds of those who read or who heard the romances in question. The readers who concern me are from England, and the romances they read there are in verse and prose, in French and English, although it is often hard to tell in which of these languages readers have met the romances they name. The “when” of these medieval readers is from the eleventh-century emergence of the genre with the *Chanson de Roland* to roughly the end of the fifteenth century, though a twelfth-century reader and a fifteenth-century one will have experienced the genre very differently.¹ The answer to my simple question turns out to be complex: there is a rich variety of responses to romances that their medieval readers have left us.

Discussions of readers and their receptions of a genre like this one can spin in a whirlpool or founder on a rock. Works of literature imply information about their own audience and what that audience expects or should admire: to study only how romances comment on reading themselves is to spiral ever inwards in self-referentiality. There are surviving comments on romance that come from outside romances, comments that take the form of direct attacks or praise, parodies, allusions, or uses of romance materials in other genres or other art forms altogether. But while it may be mildly

¹ I recognize that the *Chanson de Roland* and other *chansons de geste* are usually contrasted with romance as a separate epic genre. The contrast is essential for W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 2nd edn (London, 1907) and for John Finlayson in “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” *The Chaucer Review* 15 (1980–81), 44–62, 168–81. Nevertheless, in Chapter 2 I will be arguing that medieval catalogue evidence demonstrates that in England *chansons de gestes* were central to romance rather than contrasted with it, and in Chapter 3 I will go on to examine the implications of that centrality.

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interesting to know what an obscure commentator thought of the genre, or an anonymous woodcarver thought of a particular episode, sometimes that interest may be very mild indeed in and of itself. The charm of having actual words and works of contemporary readers of romances attracts us to the solid rock of external evidence. But the rock itself does not have to be the end of the voyage, nor does the whirlpool. The romances are. This book is a vehicle, meant to carry its own readers closer to an appreciation of what medieval romances have to say. I cannot promise to steer through clear waters between Scylla and Charybdis, but only to go back and forth from one to the other: the reader may be a little bruised by running aground on Thomas Gascoigne or a little dizzyed by how to understand a fictional listener to romances who is also a fictional teller of a romance and in some sense his own creator. Of course I am referring to Chaucer, who is listener and teller as a character in his own *Canterbury Tales*. But I hope the reader of this book will emerge with a clearer vision of medieval romances as understood by both their writers and first readers, and then take that vision to try its usefulness in reading those romances.

The title *Expectations of Romance* will itself have triggered expectations in readers of literary theory because it invokes the work of Hans Robert Jauss on the “horizons of expectation” each reader brings to a literary text.² This book is about those horizons for medieval readers in England from the late eleventh century to the fifteenth. It is indebted to a few important studies that emphasize the interrelatedness of texts in two languages. Susan Crane’s *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* breaks the ground as a major study of the characteristics of the genre in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English, differentiating romance on the island of Great Britain from its manifestation in French on the continent, and doing so by linking its distinctive insular strategies and preoccupations with distinctive insular history and culture. W. R. J. Barron’s *English Medieval Romance* insists that Middle English romances be seen as emerging from a European context, but not evaluated by preconceptions of the ideals and essential characteristics of romance derived from continental exemplars. William Calin’s *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* shows the indebtedness of Middle English romances (and other works) to both Anglo-Norman and continental French sources.³ The relationship of expectation to language is problematic from this genre’s earliest days, when the term *romauns* itself meant “in the French language,” to its latest, when writing in English had ideological shadows cast on it by the proponents and the suppressors of Lollardy. This book is interested not only

² Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, *Theory and History of Literature*, 2 (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 23.

³ Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley, 1986); Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London, 1987); Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto, 1994).

in the samenesses of Middle English and French romances, but in the differences implied by the decision to read and to write in the English language and the ways in which the system of genres was different in England than in France. The work of Reinald Hoops and Paul Strohm on medieval uses of the generic label is my point of departure for grappling with what medieval readers understood the genre to be, and the work of linguist George Lakoff on radial categories my liberation from the problems posed by categorical definitions of the genre.⁴ Because I am most interested in what late medieval readers in England thought of romances, this book pays most attention to what can be construed as reaction to romances, whether it is found in other romances, in other writings, or in other media altogether. It is a medieval commonplace that writings are meant to teach us, and a late twentieth-century rediscovery that they might legitimately do so: Alastair Minnis, J. B. Allen, and Glending Olson are important sources of information on medieval theories of the ethical roles of literature,⁵ and Larry Scanlon and Allan Mitchell particularly so on the function of exemplarity.⁶ This book shows medieval readers encountering the very genre where the tidiness of this medieval theory met the messiest assortment of medieval practices.

That Geoffrey Chaucer mentions the French prose romance *Lancelot de Lac* as a book that women reverence, and that he borrows the queen from it for a romance to be painted by a lioness, the Wife of Bath, shows at least some medieval awareness that both reading and writing of the genre were gendered.⁷ Some of the most interesting work of the last twenty years on the romance genre and its reception has focused on gender. Simon Gaunt's study

⁴ See Reinald Hoops, *Der Begriff "Romance" in der mittellenglischen und frühneuenglischen Literatur*, Anglistische Forschungen, 68 (Heidelberg, 1929); Paul Strohm, "Middle English Narrative Genres," *Genre* 13 (1980), 379–88; "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romance," *Genre* 10 (1977), 1–28; "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives," *Speculum* 46 (1971), 348–59. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago, 1987) is fundamental for my understanding of the radial category of romance. Among the more important of the categorical definitions for my purposes are Helaine Newstead, "Romances: General," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, 1: *Romances*, pp. 11–12; Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7 (1975), 135–63; Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1976); John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance"; and Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee, "Introduction," in *Romance: Generic Transformations from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover and London, 1985), pp. 1–22.

⁵ See Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, 1988); Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto, 1982); and Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).

⁶ See Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 20 (Cambridge, 1994); and Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, Chaucer Studies, 33 (Cambridge, 2004).

⁷ For women's reverence, see the Nun's Priest's Tale, in *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson and others, 3rd edn (Boston, 1987), fragment VII, lines 3212–13; for a discussion of the Wife of Bath's use of *Lancelot*, see below, Chapter 2. Further quotations from Chaucer will be from this edition.

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of *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* reveals the misogynies of romances: "Romance ostensibly elevates the feminine whilst underscoring its *cortoisie* with profound misogyny and a pervasive concern with the masculine." Sarah Kay unfavourably compares the agency of women in romance, victims of an exchange economy, to that of women in *chanson de geste*, where women are sometimes gifts in a gift economy rather than commodities. Susan Crane investigates "how romances 'perform' gender." Roberta Krueger's groundbreaking *Women Readers and the Ideology of Genre in Old French Verse Romance* explores "how women may have responded to their literary representation."⁸

Fundamentally important though such studies are, this book is not going to attempt to extend them because its germ is medieval evidence for medieval readings of romance. And we are unfortunately short of information on what the genre really meant to its women readers in England. We have a few snippets of commentary on contemporary women's taste in romance reading. Denis Piramus says that Marie de France's *lais* please women, who listen to them joyfully and willingly because they conform to their wishes:

Les lais solent as dames pleire,
De joie les oient e de gré,
Qu'il sunt sulum lur volenté.⁹

Robert of Gretham has heard about the reading tastes of Dame Aline:

Madame, bien l'ai oï dire
Ke mult amez oïr e lire
Chançon de geste e d'estoire,
E mult i metez la memoire.¹⁰

Madame, I have heard it said
That you like very much to hear and read
Chanson de geste and stories
And you commit them to your memory.

And as mentioned, Chaucer's Nun's Priest claims that women hold *Lancelot* in reverence. All three are men's perceptions of women's taste, and all three are in contexts that suggest that the taste is defective in some way.

⁸ See Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, Cambridge Studies in French, 53 (Cambridge, 1995), p. 121; Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 25–48; Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (Princeton, 1994), p. 12; Roberta Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Genre in Old French Verse Romance*, Cambridge Studies in French, 43 (Cambridge, 1993), p. 14.

⁹ *La Vie Seint Edmund le Rei : poème anglonormand du xii^e siècle*, ed. Hilding Kjellman (Göteborg, 1935), lines 46–48.

¹⁰ Robert of Gretham, *Miroir: ou Les Evangiles des domnées*, ed. Saverio Panunzio, Biblioteca di filologia romanza, 26 (Bari, 1974), lines 3–6.

Carol Meale has found that in England romances “form the second largest generic grouping amongst women’s books in the Middle Ages as a whole,” after the rather baggy category of devotional and didactic works.¹¹ Marie de France wrote Breton *lais*; so we know that not only fictional characters like Josiane but at least one historical woman saw merit in the genre and took it as seriously as she did exemplary fables and a knight’s adventures in purgatory, the other two genres that we know Marie to have written.¹² But England lacked the combination in one woman of critical reading of the genre and articulate response to it that is found in Christine de Pisan in France, upon whose work Krueger is able to draw. Krueger herself would of course not argue that Christine’s reading was *the* woman’s reading of romance. But for England we are left with speculation on “how women readers *may* have responded to their literary representation” (to use Krueger’s words again with my own emphasis). I suspect that women’s responses would have been no less varied than men’s for all that the stakes here are very high: “As the first genre in which women are portrayed both as privileged recipients and as objects of chivalric exchange and idealized desire, verse romance inaugurated a critical space in which gender identities could have been questioned even as they were formulated” (Krueger, p. 252).

It is not obvious whether women readers found Felice, the heroine of *Guy of Warwick*, a model for emulation in her handling of her wooer or in her handling of her grass-widowhood, neither, or both.¹³ Guy and his seemingly interminable battles might not have interested them; *Guy* might have been a guy’s book, enormously successful among men and thus visible, massively ignored or patiently tolerated by women. When we are told that women held the book of *Lancelot de Lac* in reverence, our informant is a male celibate created by an ironist and our information is thus slippery. One has only to imagine certain historical women – Margery Kempe springs to mind – reading a stretch of the romance to realize that not only gender but class, and not only class but religious conviction would have had an enormous influence on whether to read, and how to read. A medieval woman reading the Wife of Bath’s pronouncements on what women want might have agreed, pleased to see her own feelings spoken aloud. She might have agreed and shaken her head at the folly of all of us daughters of Eve. Or she might have indignantly disagreed. Anyone expecting a unified female readers’ response has not recently read a set of exam scripts in which the same work of contem-

¹¹ Meale, “‘alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, english, and frensch’: Laywomen and their Books in Late Medieval England,” in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol Meale, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 17 (Cambridge, 1993), 128–58 (p. 139).

¹² For Josiane, the fictional composer, see *Der anglonormannische Boeve de Haumtone*, ed. Albert Stimming, Bibliotheca normannica, 7 (Halle, 1899), line 3100. Marie de France is also known as the author of *Fables*, and of *L’Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*.

¹³ See Martha W. Driver, “‘In her owne persone semly and bewteus’: Representing Women in Stories of Guy of Warwick,” in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 133–53, for a discussion of the possible reception of Felice as an “exemplary character” in the “fifteenth-century legends of Guy” (p. 133).

porary literature is read from a few startlingly different angles, one or two of which would be ideologically quite repulsive to the author or the teacher. The ideologies of gender, like the ideologies of class and of religion, are bound to have inflected readers' responses to romances. But the prevailing voices we hear from the Middle Ages are overwhelmingly masculine ones. Thus this book will inevitably have more to say about the expectations of male readers than of women readers, or than of readers of both genders grouped together. Only in the final chapter, which reconsiders the nature of the evidence for who owned medieval romances, is there some ground for distinguishing women's reception from men's.

I work from the assumption that the early readers of romances, compared to us, were in a privileged position. Already inside the culture from which the author was writing, this was the group of readers whose expectations the romances were meeting, or frustrating, or exceeding. To understand something of how they read those romances is to eavesdrop on the other side of the conversation that authors engage in with readers. But the conversation is not in equal halves: the poets give us a richer, more imaginative Tristram and Isolde than tilemakers responding to their story can; *Troilus and Criseyde* is more fascinating than *The Mirror*. And I write this book precisely because I did not expect and I did not find that all medieval readers had the same reactions to romance. What I have found is controversy, and the romance, because it is the most prestigious of the secular genres in a culture largely – but far from completely – dedicated to the spiritual, becomes the inevitable jousting ground for medieval ideas about literary value and meaning.

The Puzzle of the Chertsey Tiles

Sometimes it is difficult to imagine what a medieval reader's reaction was. Let us begin with a puzzle: the case of the Chertsey tiles, in which the questions remain overwhelming. Chertsey was a thriving Benedictine Abbey when its abbot decided to pave part of it, probably the chapterhouse, with tiles. The tiles tell a story, the story of perhaps the most flagrant rule breakers in medieval romance, Tristram and Isolde. They are hero and heroine of one of the great love stories of Western culture, but it is a love story that involves them in incest (because Isolde is married to Tristram's uncle, King Mark),¹⁴ adultery (which is a form of treason in both), disloyalty (of Tristram to his overlord), deception (throughout, but strikingly when Isolde substitutes her still-virgin serving woman, Brengwain, for herself in the bridebed),¹⁵

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford, 2001), p. 37, for evidence that a sexual relationship between a nephew and his uncle's wife was incestuous by medieval canon law of the twelfth century according to its interpretation in the penitentials.

¹⁵ This episode is represented in the recently discovered Carlisle fragment of the twelfth-century *Tristan* by Thomas of Britain. See "*Le Roman de Tristan*" suivi de "*La Folie Tristan*" de Berne et "*La Folie Tristan*" d'Oxford, ed. Félix Lecoy, trans. and ed. Emmanuèle Baumgartner and

attempted murder (when Isolde sends Brengwain off to her death in order to make sure the bridebed trick is never revealed),¹⁶ and a very shady trifling with God's justice when Isolde solemnly swears her innocence of adultery but rigs the situation and the wording of the oath so that she does not tell a literal lie.¹⁷ All the subtleties of the story cannot have been brought out in the tile series, which before it was broken and pieces lost was apparently made up of pictures illustrating successive scenes; there were accompanying tiles with French names on them, but these only labelled the characters in the pictures. In other words, the sequence can less have told the story than have reminded the beholders of the story that they already knew. But whether the tiles show a battle scene or Tristram making a speech that has to be supplied from the memory of the viewer, or Tristram exercising courtly skills like hunting that are forbidden to those in a Benedictine cloister, they must have led the imaginations of the monks who looked at them out of Chertsey and into the world of romance. And who would have decided on such a decoration scheme?

One explanation for the presence of these very attractive but very secular tiles in an abbey is that the moulds for the tiles were a royal gift, and this is the explanation given by Elizabeth Eames, author of the British Museum's catalogue of medieval tiles: "I think it probable that the pictorial tiles in Westminster Abbey Chapter House and those of the combat and Tristram series were originally commissioned by Henry III for use in the private rooms of some of his principal residences, and that it was only afterwards that they were used in ecclesiastical sites such as Westminster Chapter House, Winchester Cathedral and Chertsey Abbey."¹⁸ Like me, Eames is surprised at seeing the Tristram series in such a context: "indeed such surprise is justified unless it can be assumed that the medieval mind could turn it into an allegory" (Eames, I, 141). Perhaps the monks were simply thriftily using leftover tiles donated by the king? But the tiles themselves cannot have been shipped to the abbey as a gift, ready-made and a shame to waste. Eames's descrip-

Ian Short, lines 109–54, and for the discovery of the fragment, see the earlier article by Michael Benskin, Tony Hunt, and Ian Short, "Un nouveau fragment du *Tristan* de Thomas," *Romania* 113 (1995), 289–319 (pp. 290–91). Since the romance by Thomas survives only in fragments, only an approximate sense of the whole is possible. A valuable reconstruction for the modern reader is that by Joseph Bédier, working from the *Tristrams Saga ok Isondar* by the Norwegian poet Brother Robert and the Middle High German *Tristan und Isold* by Gottfried von Strassburg, which are both indebted to the version by Thomas: *Le roman de Tristan par Thomas: poème du XII^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, 1902–05), I, 1–259. *Sir Tristrem* in Middle English is also derived from the version by Thomas. See *Sir Tristrem*, ed. George P. McNeill, Scottish Text Society, 8 (Edinburgh, 1886), lines 1712–18, for the bridebed substitution, and Brother Robert, *The Saga of Tristram and Isönd*, ed. and trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, NE, 1973), p. 72. Note that I use English spellings, "Tristram" and "Isolde," throughout except where making specific reference to characters in French texts. I often have occasion to refer to the story by characters' names (i.e. "the story of Tristram and Isolde") rather than by italicized title, since there are several versions of the story extant.

¹⁶ In *Sir Tristrem*, lines 1737–60, and *Saga*, pp. 73–74. Passage missing in Thomas.

¹⁷ See *Sir Tristrem*, lines 2225–92, and *Saga*, pp. 89–94. Passage missing in Thomas.

¹⁸ Eames, *A Catalogue of Medieval Lead-Glazed Earthenware Tiles in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities*, 2 vols (London, 1980), I, 164.

tion of the process of making tiles suggests that they were usually made on site. Kilns were relatively temporary structures, lasting for at most about four years. It made more sense to construct one where the tiles were to be used, dismantling it when the job was over, than to try to ship large quantities of heavy but fragile tiles. It is quite possible, of course, that the king sent the stamps or dies or moulds for these tiles to Chertsey for the abbey to use, but the abbot would still have had to decide to have these rather than more appropriate tiles made and installed in his abbey. Eames reports that waste tiles actually bearing some of the Tristram patterns have been discovered at a tile kiln site at Chertsey (I, 150). So at some point, probably in the 1270s, the Benedictines at Chertsey *chose* to turn a floor or part of a floor into the story of Tristram, and had tiles made to do so.

They were not unique. Shortly after the tiles at Chertsey were made, the same stamps or dies were used to make tiles for Halesowen Priory of Premonstratensian Canons in Worcester. Again the suggestion of royal patronage has been made. Tests done on the material of the tiles have convinced Eames that the clay was different from the Chertsey ones, and so she concludes that they were probably made at or near Halesowen (I, 159). It seems that at Halesowen, the abbot was directly responsible for the tiling of his abbey. Among the fragments of Tristram tiles at Halesowen is a round picture of an abbot, and other tiles form a surrounding circular inscription: “Istud opus Nicholas matri Christi dedit abbas + vigeat absque chao mater dona Nicholao” (“Abbot Nicholas gave this work to the Mother of Christ; Mother, grant to Nicholas that he may flourish without confusion”).¹⁹ From Hailes Abbey, a Cistercian foundation in Gloucestershire, remain fragments of related decorative tiles, pieces of a pictorial roundel with the same design as one of the Chertsey tiles (but not one identifiably connected with the Tristram story), plus a fragment that Eames says “looks very like” the snout of a dragon that appears on one of the Chertsey frame tiles from the Tristram series. (Tristram slays a dragon in order to win Isolde’s hand for Mark.)²⁰ Hailes had royal connections: founded by Henry III’s brother Richard of Cornwall, it was renovated and extended when Richard’s son Edmund bought a portion of what was believed to be the blood of Christ and donated it to the abbey, and special heraldic tiles were made for the extension to the eastern arm of the abbey church that housed the blood. Maybe the Tristram tiles were added elsewhere in the abbey buildings during these renovations. How widespread the series actually was in English abbeys is hidden by the violence that hit them in the reign of Henry VIII. Once installed, tiles are fairly sturdy, but the sanctioned vandalism that destroyed the abbey buildings left even the floor tiles exposed to weather, deliberate smashing, and scavenging for reuse elsewhere.

At the least then, there were two, perhaps three, abbeys in late thirteenth-century England with the story of Tristram and Isolde as part of their decora-

¹⁹ See Eames, I, 159.

²⁰ Eames, I, 155. See *Sir Tristrem*, lines 1332–628, and *Saga*, pp. 52–56. Passage missing in Thomas.

tive scheme, and these of three different orders. Why? This tale is decidedly odd as the decorating scheme for a monastery: Tristram and Isolde make love to each other as he brings her in a ship from Ireland to marry his uncle Mark; Isolde and Tristram's sexual relationship continues off and on for the rest of their lives; the duped King Mark suspects Tristram and Isolde, but repeatedly allows himself to be persuaded of their fidelity. How medieval readers read this story (or this cluster of stories, for there are many versions of the romance) is not at all clear, any more than it is clear that there was a single-minded way of reading romance in general. Surprising people defend romances as ethically valuable in the Middle Ages, and others attack them in predictable ways. The Chertsey tiles strike me as an extreme posing of an important question: what did medieval audiences see in medieval romances?

We cannot reject the allegorical possibility out of hand. Maybe the story of Tristram and Isolde meant something else, could be read as spiritually uplifting. In fact there is evidence elsewhere that an episode from the story could be used as part of a programme of spiritual improvement, and we will be considering that episode and its uses in artworks in Chapter 4. But it is one thing *explicitly* to allegorize an episode, and another to present a long and complex story and assume future readers will know and employ only an allegorical reading of it. The literal will not disappear. Indeed as Dante asserts in his *Convivio*, "since in what is written down the literal meaning is always the outside, it is impossible to arrive at the other senses, especially the allegorical, without first arriving at the literal."²¹ Consider the difficulty in managing the allegorical and literal readings of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. Both are suggested by the narrator Clerk, who implies an allegorical reading in which Walter is analogous to God, and a literal reading when he exclaims over Walter's bad behaviour as a husband:

For sith a woman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte.
(*Clerk's Tale*, IV, lines 1149–52)

He hadde assayed hire ynogh before,
And foond hire evere good; what neded it
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.
(*Clerk's Tale*, IV, lines 456–62)

²¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Convivio*, trans. Richard Lansing, in *Digital Dante*, Columbia University, 1998. <http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/new/> [June 18, 2007], Book 2, Chapter 1.

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But his insistence that the allegorical reading is *the* right one (lines 1142–48) is met by the Host's response to the literal reading:

By Goddes bones,
Me were lever than a barel ale
My wyf at home had herd this legende ones!
(*Clerk's Tale*, IV, lines 1212b–12d)

Where an allegorical reading is called for, it is customary for the call to be explicit, for the conversion from literal to allegorical to be written into the text with comments guiding the reader's interpretation, as it is in works like the *Gesta Romanorum* which, like the *Clerk's Tale*, sometimes exploits a piquant contrast between the ethics of the literal sense and the ethics of the allegorical one. But neither in the tile series as we have it, nor in any of the texts of the Tristram story that we have, nor in independent commentaries, do we have instructions for reading the story allegorically.

The series of tiles at Chertsey and Halesowen, and possibly at Hailes, has to have been different in its effect from an allegorized episode. It illustrates a whole story, not a single tableau. It invites protracted study of both the sequence of pictures and the accompanying French labels, and like the romances, assumes our sympathy for Tristram and Isolde. A comment from cleric and man of letters Peter of Blois, who at one time was secretary to the widowed Eleanor of Aquitaine and died in 1212, suggests sympathy rather than allegoresis as a predictable response to the story of Tristram:

Sæpe in tragædiis et aliis carminibus poetarum, in jocularum cantilenis describitur aliquis vir prudens, decorus, fortis, amabilis et per omnia gratus. Recitantur etiam pressuræ vel injuriæ eidem crudeliter irrogatæ, sicut de Arturo et Gaugano et Tristanno, fabulosa quædam referunt histriones, quorum auditu concutiantur ad compassionem audientium corda, et usque ad lacrymas compunguntur.²²

Often in tragedies and other compositions of poets, (as) in the songs of minstrels, a man is described who is prudent, comely, brave, lovable, and gracious in every way. The poet tells of the oppressions or injuries cruelly inflicted on him, as in some of the fictions that performers relate of Arthur and Gawain and Tristram, at hearing which the audience's hearts are excited to compassion, and moved even to tears.²³

Among the tiles that remain to us are some that remind us that Tristram was renowned not only for prowess in single combat (against Morhault of Ireland, the dragon, Duke Morgan) and for a disastrous love, but also for courtly

²² Peter of Blois, "De confessione sacramentale," in *Petri Blesensi: Opera Omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Turnholt, 1844), col. 1088D.

²³ Trans. Peter Dronke, in "Peter of Blois and Medieval Poetry at the Court of Henry II," *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976), 185–235 (p. 198).

accomplishments, as he is later described by Malory.²⁴ The story as it appears on the Chertsey tiles is indeed partly exemplary, but what it exemplifies is not Christian virtue and vice, but instead courtly accomplishment.

Exemplarity itself was one of the most important ways by which clerical writers communicated the teachings of the Church, as Larry Scanlon reminds us, both in sermon *exempla* and in what he calls public *exempla*, a tradition of instruction of the prince ultimately going back to the classical period, but continued in the medieval cleric's practice of communicating political ideology in the *Fürstenspiegel*, or Mirror for Princes. This clerical authority, Scanlon argues, is appropriated for the laity by the lay writer Geoffrey Chaucer in the later fourteenth century.²⁵ But as J. Allan Mitchell maintains in *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, exemplarity is so pervasive in late medieval literature that it is not so much a discrete genre as a thorough-going reading practice: medieval readers read for the moral, expected what they read to be exemplary in some way.²⁶ Romance in the cloister reverses Scanlon's model of traditional exemplarity in which the clerical authority instructs the lay audience, and returns us directly to our problem: if the audience was monastic, what if anything did it expect romances to exemplify? Models for monks to imitate? Vices to eschew? Some combination more complex? And what did it find in the story of Tristram?

Probably the series of tiles was placed, not in the abbey church, but in a less sacred setting; surviving tiles at Westminster Abbey are in the Chapter House, and perhaps at Chertsey the monks allowed their attention to be distracted by the pieces of the Tristram story under their feet as they listened to the daily reading of a chapter of their Rule, or in the evening after supper to the group readings prescribed by that Rule:

when colaciun ringis, þan salle alle assembl in þe chapitir. An sal rede þe
lescun of þe halizis, ouþir of haly writ, for to comforth þaim þat it heris. In
þat tyme sal ye noht rede þe boke of þe kingis, for nan vnait sal be herde
þat tyme for þa þat ere of febil þoht; In oþir tyme mai it be red.²⁷

This is the so-called Northern Prose version of Chapter 42 of the Benedictine Rule; even the reading of part of the Bible, the Book of Kings (containing stories of love and war like those of David and Solomon) is forbidden at certain times of day as being dangerous to those of weak minds. The Northern Metrical Version of the same chapter does not forbid the Book of Kings, but

²⁴ See *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 3 vols, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1990), I, 375.

²⁵ See Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*; for the public *exemplum*, especially pp. 81–134, and for Chaucer's lay appropriation of clerical authority, especially pp. 13–17.

²⁶ See Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, especially pp. 14–15.

²⁷ Benedict [of Nursia], *Three Middle English Versions of the Rule of St. Benet*, ed. Ernst A. Kock, Early English Text Society Extra Series, 120 (London, 1902), p. 29. The quotation is from the version in London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 378, from the beginning of the fifteenth century.

instead says, “Tales of trofils pai sal non tel.”²⁸ As we will see later, “trofils” or “trifles” is a code word for the materials of secular literature, especially romances. Through the ears, words forbidding such trifles are heard while under the feet but also before the eyes, such trifles are richly illustrated.

Even if an allegorical reading once existed, one that surprisingly left no traces, the literal story of Tristram and Isolde looks to be particularly unseemly for monks whose reading was supposed to be devout, involving as it does sympathy for central characters of extreme passion and antisocial behaviour. Centuries earlier, writing to the bishop of Lindisfarne after the invasion and destruction of the 790s, Alcuin warned against epic in the cloister:

Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio. Ibi decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus; utrosque tenere non poterit.²⁹

The words of God should be read in the refectory; the lector should be heard there, not the harper; the sermons of the fathers, not the songs of the heathen. What does Ingeld have to do with Christ? The house is narrow; it cannot hold both.

Yet late-medieval abbots seem to have taken romance-reading in their stride. The Premonstratensians and especially the Cistercians were more rigorous than the Benedictines in excluding secular distraction from the cloisters, but a surviving library catalogue from the beginning of the fifteenth century shows that even the Premonstratensian Titchfield Abbey held stories about Amis and Amiloun, Guy of Warwick, and Bevis of Hampton, as well as Charlemagne, “in gallicis,” in French. The Cistercian Bordesley Abbey was given books by Guy de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, in 1306 which included many romances.³⁰ And indeed Michael Benskin’s discovery of a sixth fragment of Thomas of Britain’s *Tristan* as flypapers in the binding of a cartulary from the Cistercian Holm Cultram Abbey demonstrates Cistercian monks had access to the romance itself while in their abbey.³¹ How would such holdings have fitted into the monks’ programme of reading? In the fourteenth

²⁸ The version in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian A.XXV, early fifteenth century, line 1735.

²⁹ *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, ed. Philipp Jaffé, Wilhelm Wattenbach and Ernst Ludwig Dümmler, Bibliotheca rerum germanicarum, 6 (Berlin, 1873), epistle 81, p. 357.

³⁰ See David N. Bell, *The Libraries of the Cistercians, Gilbertines and Premonstratensians* (London, 1992), for Titchfield, pp. 180–254: QI (Vita Amici et Amilonis), QX (Guydo de Warewyck in quaterno), Q.XVI (Gesta Beues de Suthampton), Q.XVII (Gesta Guydonis de Warewyck in quaterno), Q.XVIII (Gesta Karoli Francie in quaterno, Bella Karoli et Agulandi); for Guy de Beauchamp’s gift to Bordesley, pp. 4–10: items 2, 8, 16, 18, 22, 25, 27b; and see the earlier article by Madeleine Blaess, “L’Abbaye de Bordesley et les livres de Guy de Beauchamp,” *Romania* 78 (1957), 511–18. This is a small sample of the romances to be found connected to monasteries; more will be discussed throughout, and a summary appendix given at the end.

³¹ See Michael Benskin, Tony Hunt, and Ian Short, “Un nouveau fragment du *Tristan* de Thomas,” pp. 289–319; for the discovery, pp. 290–91.

century John Mason, Benedictine monk of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, composed on behalf of the abbot a letter to a friend to ask to borrow "a story of Godfrey of Bouillon's conquest of the Holy Land, noting that it is one of those works 'you have been accustomed to read in order to mix entertainment with your duties (*ex quorum lectura interponi solent solacia curis vestris*)' and that he too will receive pleasure and consolation from it."³² As Glending Olson points out, Mason is here echoing the advice of Cato, "Interpone tuis interdum gaudia curis," mix pleasures with your duties.³³ This same abbey owned no fewer than four copies of *Gui de Warewic* according to a catalogue of the late fifteenth century.³⁴ Evidently some monks – even abbots – found *solacia* and *gaudia* in romances. Tristram's erotic love, skill in blood sports, chess, and harping, success as a fighter against champion, dragon, and giant – these things considered, perhaps it was only natural when younger sons of the nobility, dedicated to the monastery by birth-order but brought up among those allowed to aspire to the life celebrated by romance, carried their memories of the story of Tristram and Isolde to the monastery, and gave them new strength each day by retracing the story on the floor rather than heeding the daily chapter of the rule being read aloud to all the monks. But the natural is a suspect moral category. By what theory of reading or of monasticism is the natural in this case made into the morally desirable?

A Reading Monk: Robert Manning

What the story of Tristram was doing in abbeys of late thirteenth-century England, and how it was read, can be guessed at by looking at some comments on story in general and romances in particular by a monastic of the next generation, Robert Manning of Brunne, writing at the double monasteries at Sempringham and then Sixhills before 1338. Manning was a Gilbertine canon, and the Gilbertines were a strict and austere order. Their rules specify,

Sculpturæ, vel picturæ superflue in Ecclesiis nostris, seu in officinis aliquibus Monasterii ne fiant interdicimus, quia, dum talibus intenditur, utilitas bonæ meditationibus, vel disciplina religiosæ gravitatis, sæpe negligitur.³⁵

We forbid that there be sculptures or superfluous pictures in our churches or in any buildings of the monastery, because the usefulness of good meditation or the discipline of serious religion is often neglected while one pays attention to such things.

³² Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, pp. 113–14.

³³ Olson, p. 114, cites *Disticha Catonis* III, 6.

³⁴ See Madeleine Blaess, "Les Manuscrits français dans les monastères anglais au Moyen Âge," *Romania* 94 (1973), 321–58 (pp. 351–56).

³⁵ Gilbert of Sempringham, "Gilbertinis," in *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. William Dugdale and Roger Dodsworth, 3 vols (London, 1655–73), II: *De Canonicis Regularibus Augustinianis, scilicet Hospitalariis, Templariis, Gilbertinis; Præmonstratensibus, & Maturinis sive Trinitarianis* (1661), 15, p. 725.

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Not for them elaborate pictorial tiles in the abbey; they were forbidden any pictorial ornamentation there at all except for painted crosses made of wood. And Manning's view of literary recreation seems at first blush to be equally restrictive: he is best known for his manual of religious instruction, *Handlyng Synne*, which he begins by announcing,

For lewed men y vndur toke
On englyssh tonge to make þys boke,
For many beyn of swyche manere
þat talys & rymys wyle bleþly here
Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale,
Loue men to lestene trotouale,
þat may falle ofte to velanye
To dedly synne or outhur folye.
For swyche men haue y made þys ryme
þat þey may weyl dyspende here tyme
And þer yn sumwhat for to here
To leue al swyche foul manere
And for to kyn knowe þer ynne
þat þey wene no synne be ynne.³⁶

"Trotouale" is something of which Manning clearly disapproves, as he insists three times in the course of *Handlyng Synne* on a distinction between the kind of tales he tells (morally improving ones) and *troteuale*:

þenkeþ on þys tale
And takeþ hyt for no troteuale.
(line 8080; see also lines 5970, 9244)

Since the derivation of the word is unknown and since it is recorded only twice outside Manning's work, it is hard to pinpoint what exactly the implications of the term are: *OED* and *MED* define it as "idle tale-telling, vain talk"; *MED* adds "also, a trifle, a piece of foolishness."³⁷ Such idle tale-telling provokes "velanye," "dedly synne," or "folye" in its hearers, but to read Manning's tales, by contrast, is to spend time well: their readers leave foul behaviour; the tales teach readers to read better, to understand the nature of the stories that before they thought there was no harm in. Manning's aim in *Handlyng Synne*, then, is clearly didactic, and the tendency of people to seek out entertainment is a trait that he concedes and takes advantage of for his own spiritual and ethical purposes.

In writing his *Chronicle* in the late 1330s, Manning is less overtly didactic: in his prologue he claims as his intention to entertain, to give the unlearned

³⁶ *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 14 (Binghamton, NY, 1983), lines 43–56.

³⁷ See *OED troteuale*; *MED trotevāle*.

who have no Latin or French “solace & gamen”³⁸ as they sit in fellowship. He uses secular material, almost all of it a chronicle of Britain with only a little introductory matter from the Bible and some from the Troy story. The first part is based mainly on Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and the second part, from the coming of the Saxons, on Peter of Langtoft’s chronicle. Characters from romance like Guy of Warwick find their way into the chronicle at their historical moment, in Guy’s case during the reign of Athelstan; this is true in Peter of Langtoft as well as Manning. But for our purposes Manning is most interesting when he comments on romance material he finds missing from his chronicle sources.

One such absence is the story of Havelok the Dane:

Bot I haf gret ferly þat I fynd no man
þat has writen in story how Hauelok þis lond wan:
noīþer Gildas, no Bede, no Henry of Huntinton,
no William of Malmesbiri, ne Pers of Bridlynton
writes not in þer bokes of no Kyng Athelwold,
ne Goldeburgh, his douhtere, ne Hauelok not of told.
Whilk tyme þe were kynges, long or now late,
þei mak no menyng whan, no in what date.
Bot þat þise lowed men vpon English tellis,
right story can me not ken, þe certeynte what spellis.
Men sais in Lyncoln castelle ligges ȝit a stone,
þat Hauelok kast wele forbi euerilkone.
& ȝit þe chapelle standes, þer he weddid his wife,
Goldeburgh, þe kynges douhter, þat sawe is ȝit rife,
& of Grime, a fisshere, men redes ȝit in ryme
þat he bigged Grymesby, Grime þat ilk tyme.
Of alle stories of honoure, þat I haf þorgh souht,
I fynd þat no compiloure of him tellis ouht.
Sen I fynd non redy þat tellis of Hauelok kynde,
turne we to þat story þat we writen fynde. (part 2, lines 519–38)³⁹

Havelok is absent from history (not “writen in story,” or the “bokes” of the named chroniclers), but spoken of by lay people in English, memorialized by thing (the stone he threw is in Lincoln castle, “men sais”), building (the chapel in which he married Goldeburgh, “þat sawe is ȝit rife”), and place (Grimsby, founded by his foster-father, of whom “men redes ȝit in ryme”). Manning apparently does not know Gaimar’s Anglo-Norman *L’Estoire des Engleis* (ca. 1135–40), which does incorporate Havelok’s story into the sweep of English history; the “ryme” that men are reading may be the Anglo-Norman *Lai d’Havelok* or, by the late 1330s when Manning is writing, the

³⁸ Robert Mannyng of Brunne: “*The Chronicle*,” ed. Idelle Sullens, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 153 (Binghampton, NY, 1996), part 1, line 9.

³⁹ In one manuscript, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 131, a version of the story of Havelok and “Argille” appears instead of these lines. See Sullens’s edition, pp. 500–2.

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English romance *Havelok*, the more likely alternative in a context in which Manning is writing of an English tradition (what “þise lowed men vpon Inglish tellis”). He cannot understand why his sources do not give him the story, well known to him as a Lincolnshire man, of the conquest of England by Havelok, Gunter’s son, although they do tell of Gunter’s attempted invasion and eventual conversion and withdrawal in Alfred’s time.

Manning’s attitude suggests that a romance is a relation of true events, a story that may not yet have reached the status of “honoure” implied in its recording in the great chronicles made by respected compilers, where it can reliably be found again for reference by someone with access to a good library. Only uneducated people, in English, tell the right story, the certainty of it; the chronicle context (the when) is missing, and so too presumably is a present textual source from which Manning can work. Romance, like chronicle, would be valuable as a tool for learning, a record for the edification of the reader of the wise and foolish actions of men and women of the past, from which we of the present can learn:

And it is wisdom for to wyttē
þe state of þe land & haf it wryten:
what manere of folk first it wan,
& of what kynde it first began.
And gude it is for many thynges
for to here þe dedis of kynges,
whilk were foles, & whilk were wyse,
& whilk of þaim couthe most quantyse,
and whilk did wrong, & whilk ryght,
& whilk mayntened pes & fyght. (part 1, lines 11–20)

When Manning considers the story of King Arthur, he distinguishes between stories within the history he tells and stories left outside it, but not on ethical grounds. Although as it stands the Arthurian material that Manning uses makes up about an eighth of his lengthy chronicle, he leaves untold the “many selcouth,” “many wonders,” that are said about the king, adventures that lie outside the chronicle histories that tell mostly of his wars (one striking exception being his conquest of the giant at Mount St. Michel, a tale of a wonder that turns up in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and subsequent chroniclers). Manning’s account acknowledges that such stories are not considered true by everyone, although he himself is sceptical of the scepticism:

In þis tuelue 3eres tyme
felle auentours þat men rede of ryme;
in þat tyme wer herd & sene
þat som say þat neuer had bene;
of Arthure is said many selcouth
in diuers landes, north & south,
þat men haldes now for fable,

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be þei neuer so trew no stable.
Not alle is sothe ne alle lie,
ne alle wysdom ne alle folie;
þer is of him no þing said
þat ne it may to gode laid. (part 1, lines 10,391–402)

Manning leaves out the stories toward which others direct such scepticism. But in the end, he implies, what matters is not whether the story is factual or not: Manning will acknowledge that there is a mixture of truth and falsehood in stories of Arthur, even a mixture of wisdom and folly, but the point is that everything said about him may be used for good purposes. *Auentours, fable, lie, and folie*: all of these are terms that are elsewhere used of and for romances; by implication, Manning is asserting that romances too can be grist to the moralist's mill. Here Manning is invoking a modified form of the Pauline dictum "All that is written is written to our doctrine"⁴⁰ and applying it, not as Saint Paul does to Scripture, nor as many medieval writers did to any writing, but to things "said" of Arthur, whether true or false, wisdom or folly. Manning's criteria here are mysterious: he clearly would not argue that all stories are equally good for the reader, since he begins *Handlyng Synne* with the explicit purpose of providing beneficial stories to substitute for dangerous ones. But this passage implies that all Arthurian romances may be read ethically; true or false, the things that are said of Arthur may lead to good. This conclusion about the uses of Arthurian story is surprising in that it remains altogether unclear how Manning would derive the good from an Arthurian romance that was a lie and a folly, and what kind of story he would by contrast consider *trotevale*.

When Manning turns his attention to another missing story, that of Tristram, we have what looks like a rare instance of direct literary commentary on a specific English romance, and what therefore seems to promise more clarity about things that a medieval reader valued in such a romance:

I see in song, in sedgeyng tale
of Erceldoun & of Kendale:
Non þam says as þai þam wrought,
& in þer sayng it semes noght.
Þat may þou here in sir Tristrem,
ouer gestes it has þe steem [i.e. "esteem"]
ouer alle that is or was,
if men it sayd as made Thomas.
But I here it no man so say
þat of som copple, som is away.
So þare fayre sayng here befor

⁴⁰ Romans 15:4: "Quaecumque enim scripta sunt, ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt." Cited from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. Alberto Colunga and Lorenzo Turrado, 5th edn (Madrid, 1977).

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is þare trauayle nere forlorn;
þai sayd it for pride & nobleye
þat non were suylk as þei,
and alle þat þai wild ouerwhere,
alle þat ilk wille now forfare.
þai sayd in so quante Inglis
þat manyone wate not what it is. (part 1, lines 93–110)

Here we have someone we know about, his name and place of birth (Kesteven, in Lincolnshire) and dates (he wrote in the first half of the fourteenth century) and vocation, a medieval reader, giving an evaluation of a preserved romance and implying it is by a named poet, Thomas of Erceldoune. But immediately certainty dissolves into uncertainty: Manning himself points out that there are various versions of the story circulating. The ones most important to the scene in England still extant are the fragment of the late twelfth-century poem in Anglo-Norman by Thomas of Britain; the fragments from Bérout's roughly contemporary version; the late thirteenth-century Middle English *Sir Tristrem* based on Thomas's version; the Norwegian 1226 translation of Thomas's poem, important in this context only because with others it helps modern scholars reconstruct the probable contents of Thomas's poem; the Anglo-Norman poems written around the same time as Thomas's poem that recount episodes: the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*, the *lai Chievrefoil* by Marie de France, and the *Donnei des amants* (or *Lovers' Flirting*); and the continental *Folie Tristan de Berne*, of which a fragment survives in an Anglo-Norman copy.⁴¹ The extant Middle English romance *Sir Tristrem* reads like one of those that fall short of excellence. There was an historical Thomas who is recorded as inheriting land in Erceldoune, but we have no confirming evidence that he was the author of either the extant *Sir Tristrem* or the admirable version that Manning praises. Nor do we know how close was the particular manuscript manifestation of the story that Manning saw (or recitation that Manning heard) to the *Sir Tristrem* that is preserved, not quite complete, in the Auchinleck manuscript.⁴² To add to the complication, Manning is talking about *two* authors here, one from Erceldoune and the other from Kendale. The former would be Thomas of Erceldoune (?1220–?1297) to whom several poems and a lot of prophecy were ascribed in the Middle Ages but who is today

⁴¹ For the versions not already mentioned, see Bérout, *Le Roman de Tristan: poème du XII^e siècle*, ed. Ernest Muret and L. M. Defourques, *Classiques français du Moyen Âge*, 12, 4th edn (Paris, 1947); both *Folies* in Thomas of Britain, "*Le Roman de Tristan*," suivi de "*La Folie Tristan de Berne*" et "*La Folie Tristan d'Oxford*," ed. Félix Lecoy, trans. and commentary by Emmanuèle Baumgartner and Ian Short (Paris, 2003), *La Folie Tristan d'Oxford* at pp. 349–429 and *La Folie Tristan de Berne* at pp. 299–348; Marie de France, *Chievrefoil*, in *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Rychner, *Les Classiques français du Moyen Âge*, 87 (Paris, 1966), pp. 151–54; and "*Le Donnei des amants*," ed. Gaston Paris, *Romania* 25 (1896), 497–541.

⁴² Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1. As the largest manuscript collection of romances in Middle English, the Auchinleck manuscript will be referred to frequently in these pages.

acknowledged as the author of none extant. The latter, Thomas of Kendale, is mentioned later by Manning as the author of a story of the brothers Skardyng and Flayn (part 1, lines 14,203–204). While Manning apparently knows that a Thomas wrote the poem, he apparently does not know *which* Thomas. The passage opens with a reference to both and commentary on how the song and saying of both is reproduced badly by others, so that their work “semes noght.” Then *Sir Tristrem* is cited as the example of such bad reproduction. The tacit assumption is that one Thomas or the other is the author; the pronouns referring to the author later on in the passage are all plural, referring vaguely to both Thomasses, as if the poem had been a joint effort.

Is there any truth in Manning’s ascription of the poem to one or another Thomas? Thomas of Erceldoune is identified in the extant version of the English poem as a teller of Tristram’s story:

I was a[t Erpeldoun]
Wiþ tomas spak y þare;
Þer herd y rede in rounne
Who tristrem gat and bare,
Who was king wiþ croun,
And who him forsterd ȝare,
And who was bold baroun,
As þair elders ware.
Bi ȝere
Tomas telles in toun
Þis auentours as þai ware.⁴³ (*Sir Tristrem*, lines 1–11)

These opening words of *Sir Tristrem* can be interpreted in several ways: first, the poet speaking *is* Thomas of Erceldoune, referring to himself as author. But this is unlikely. Second, the poet speaking knows that a Thomas wrote the Anglo-Norman *Tristan* since the Anglo-Norman poet incorporated his own name in the poem, and also knows that there existed a poet named Thomas of Erceldoune, and he has deliberately conflated the two to give his own translation of Thomas’s *Tristan* an English origin as authoritative as possible. Or third, the poet of this poem is reporting truthfully but elliptically (in a fiction of meeting the author, like Chaucer’s Clerk reporting that he met Petrarch and learned a story from him) that he has based his work on an earlier English version of the story, one that he believes to have been by Thomas of Erceldoune.

If this third scenario is made to mesh with Manning’s assessment, the author of *Sir Tristrem* changes Thomas of Erceldoune’s poem, perhaps because he does not have it in front of him, is recreating it from memory, and cannot manage the poetic excellences that Manning praises with the phrase “fayre sayng,” and damns with the phrase “for pride & nobleye”; the phrase “quante

⁴³ Material in square brackets is supplied from the catchwords at the bottom of the preceding leaf; part of the first line has been cut out with the illumination that heads the poem in the manuscript.