Of Guy, of his Felice, and of his Guilt

Problematic Love in the Auchinleck Guy of Warwick

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Matthew Rooney has read for us one of the iconic love relationships of the English Middle Ages, the devotion of Guy of Warwick to his beloved Felice, through the lens of a judicious analysis of actual medieval cultural practices in conflict with the ideologies of courtly love. Guy of Warwick was the most popular of the popular romances in England, Felice the most demanding of elevated ladies requiring prowess of her suitor and the most successful in inspiring that prowess, and yet as Rooney shows, Guy's long-deferred attainment of his object collapses immediately into guilt and alienation instead of the happy-ever-after marriage that we might have expected of a foundational romance. Rooney cites The Romance of a Knight, of his Lady, and of a Clerk (despite its title actually not a romance at all but an Anglo-Norman fabliau) for its showing up of the apparent restrictions of agency and the weight of guilt in the courtly love relationship of romances as "artificial"; both the restrictions and the guilt are epitomized in Guy, but in its clash between courtly love and religious doctrine, the latter triumphs.

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The concept of ideal happiness as obtained through the fulfilment of romantic love, according to C.S. Lewis, first comes to fruition during the Middle Ages (4). Lewis sees the shift away from pragmatic marital relationships—as seen in the Classical Age—and toward the passionate love that dominates medieval literature to be, in part, due to a misunderstanding of classical texts such as Ovid's Ars Amatoria (7). Whether or not it is fair to characterize this shift in love relationships as "Ovid misunderstood," as Lewis famously states (7), the

development of the courtly model of love, both in reality and romances, is fraught with complications. Literate members of the aristocracy during the Middle Ages were simultaneously the most likely to consume stories of romantic love and the least likely to be able to enact it due to social marital obligations (Sylvester 131-2, Lewis 41). Sarah Kay, for instance, writes that one of the chief problems in Eneas is that of reconciling romantic love with practical concerns such as "marriage, dynasty, and empire when 'real life' seems determined to make them incompatible" (89). For Lewis, this conflict between the practical and the passionate has led a number of medieval theologians to conflate passionate love with adultery, even if those involved in the alleged affair were married to each other (14-16).

The goal of this paper is to examine the manifestation of these complications through the aspects of courtly love as demonstrated in Guy of Warwick. For the sake of this examination it will be assumed that the couplet and stanzaic Guy of Warwick present in the Auchinleck Manuscript are intended to be read as a single coherent narrative. First I will detail the difficulties of representing passionate love in the Middle Ages, as well as the contemporary understanding of the relationship between passionate love and adultery, and examine how these factors inform the understanding of passionate love within romances. Once this foundation is laid, I will look at the representation of the romantic love between Guy and Felice, with particular attention paid to Guy's illness, his

endeavours to establish himself as a knight, and how the dramatic shift in Guy's desires—which occurs after his marriage to Felice—in the stanzaic Guy could be interpreted as offering commentary on the shortcomings of courtly love. Then, following the argument furthered by Louise M. Sylvester in Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality that fabliaux and romances were likely read concurrently by their audience and should be seen to inform one-another (131, 135), the fabliau Romance of a Knight of his Lady and of a Clerk's presentation—and criticism—of the courtly love model will be briefly compared to Guy of Warwick by way of conclusion.

While, as stated above, the medieval concept of romantic love can be traced back to Ovid, a culture of courtly love was first established in the Middle Ages. Ovid's works—in particular those on love—were so popular in Europe during the twelfth century that it has led some scholars to name the period the "age of Ovid," and this popularity is reflected in the themes explored in contemporary poetry (Kay 87). Kay writes that "Ovidian motifs—love as fever, a sweet pain or a welcome wound, the beloved as a medicine [...] are scattered throughout" poetry of the period (87). Though the Auchinleck Guy of Warwick dates from the early fourteenth century, and is derived from an earlier Anglo-Norman romance, these Ovidian motifs are still an essential part of romantic love. We see these motifs reflected in Guy's sudden illness upon first seeing Felice in the couplet Guy. His love is described

as "an iuel" that "is on him fast," and that immediately drains his strength:

> Þat he no may it of him cast;
> He no wil noman his care schewe.
> His sorwes ben euer aliche newe;
> Þat he no may his loue haue
> Grete strengþe him doþ wiþdrawe. (184-90)

There are suggestions in line 189 that obtaining the object of his love may restore him, like a medicine, to his previous condition, and that without that "medicine" his sorrows are to be "euer aliche newe." Later this sickness is described, as in Ovid, as a fever: "'So hot ich am & bren[n]inge [...] 'a feuer it is'" (363). Guy's forlorn state, excepting its severity, is typical of conceptions of love during the Middle Ages. Romance of a Knight, for example, plays on these expectations by having its Lady joke that—since she is "neither physician nor priest" —she is unable to cure the clerk's love sickness (304-7). Ruth Mazo Karras points out that young, upper class men in medieval Europe would participate in courtly love rituals which included "secret letters" and "the man's pining away" over his love object (50). The intention behind such actions, and whether courtly love was treated seriously in twelfth-century Europe, is unclear, but Karras notes that "writers of the later Middle Ages constructed their accounts of their contemporaries as though it [courtly love] was a reality for them" (53). Public displays of emotion

such as those seen in romance literature were generally accepted within male homosocial spheres, and in many cases even encouraged or admired—"it was manly to have deeply held feelings, and important to display them" (65). Frauendienst—a man's service to a lady—was first explored in romances and was later mimicked in life, creating what Karras calls "a myth of men subordinating themselves to women" (50-1).

These reflections of chivalric literature in the lives of young medieval men help to illuminate what people expected of the literature and how they interacted with it, but they do not encapsulate the whole of upper-class medieval life (Karras 22). If one is to go by Lewis' formula that there are four key components of courtly love—namely "Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love"—then perhaps courtesy is the only aspect regularly achieved by courtly love's reflection in reality (12). For now I want to focus on the medieval view of adultery and its relationship with passionate love. Lewis argues that regardless of the marital status of those involved in passionate love, the medieval church interpreted passionate love as "wicked" (14). He goes on to state that a man who had engaged in passion-driven sex "had no choice between 'guilty' or innocent love before him"(14). Lewis cites Hugo of St. Victor's understanding of passion as evil and Peter Lombard's view that "passionate love of a man's own wife is adultery" (15). Thomas Aquinas gives a more "modern" view of the positive correlation between mutual affection and sexual pleasure, but uses this

correlation as a tool to explain the evils of incest (Lewis 16). Full participation in the courtly love represented in romances was—in effect—prohibited by religious authorities. This prohibition, of course, does not mean that people did not engage in passionate love affairs or enjoy a passionate relationship with their marital partners during the Middle Ages, but it is emblematic of the tension between love and marriage as it could have been understood at the time. In the chivalric context, passionate love is only legitimate if it is granted by the lady due to the knight's abilities (Karras 52), and thus passionate love within marriage is often contaminated by feelings of guilt (Lewis 14, 37, Ramsey 98).

The separation between passionate and marital love is essential to understanding how love operates in Guy and Romance of a Knight. Based on Lewis' analysis, passionate love, adultery, and guilt are not easily separated in the mind of the contemporary aristocratic audience that consumed these romances. I would not argue that Lewis' analysis of this relationship is capable of informing our reading of all—or even most—medieval romances, but I hope to show that it can provide a useful lens when considering Guy of Warwick in particular and fabliaux in general. The focus on adultery that Lewis suggests is the reason that, despite the more prominent influence of Gaston Paris' model of courtly love in recent criticism (Kay 84), I have decided to forefront Lewis in the present study. Lewis' model will be useful when interpreting the fabliau primarily because of the adultery that occurs outright

within its narrative, and the connection between passionate love, adultery, and guilt has a special resonance with Guy of Warwick due to the abrupt shift in the nature of Guy's love for Felice upon their marriage at the beginning of the stanzaic Guy.

During the couplet Guy, however, their relationship is free from the complications of adultery. Guy's love for Felice touches on—and ends up reinforcing—many of the tropes traditional to romance literature. I have already discussed some of the negative aspects of love sickness in Guy and the idea that the love object can act as a medicine for that illness, but while Guy's ability to feel intense emotion is a sign of nobility, his status as a steward's son problematizes his love sickness. Guy is unable to admit his love for Felice, partly because he fears the response of her father—in his misery Guy is sure that the earl "wil quelle" him if he discovers his love (390). But more importantly he is unable to admit his love because he would be breaking the rules of courtly love by making his love public (Kay 84). The only way that Guy is capable of "curing" his illness is by privately admitting his love to Felice herself, which involves Guy entering spaces—such as Felice's tower—that he is prohibited from entering unless directed by Felice's father. The combination of social rules and those of courtly love force Guy to transgress one or the other. Felice, though in a more powerful position than Guy, is also bound by her position and the rules of courtly love, but in her case she is bound to deny Guy. She, as the earl's daughter, would not obtain an increase in prestige

by having a lover that does not have the either the requisite political connections nor the prowess for someone in her position.

Karras writes that "for every woman represented as a powerful decision-maker, granting or withholding her love, a man is represented as supplicant" (25). Though archetypical, Guy's misery has negative consequences not only for himself, but for his family and the earl (349-56). Given his comparatively low status, Guy can only obtain Felice's love through a demonstration of his knightly prowess (Karras 52), and since there is no cure for Guy's illness other than Felice's love, Guy's decision is again forced by the conventions of courtly love. If Guy intends on challenging "loue þurth ri3t," he is forced to prove his right to love by demonstrating his prowess through defeating knights and winning prizes (586-94). It would be unfair to depict this model of love as strictly a confining force, however. Bernard O'Donogue argues that a lover's passion in the romance is a "way of compensating for the ways in which the rigid order of society marginalized the unfulfilled and the disadvantaged" (13). While Guy's decisions are restricted due to his social status, his capacity to express his love through the courtly model allows him a certain social mobility—assuming he is capable of obtaining prowess.

The idea that desire for one's love object can inspire one to greatness has a long history in romance literature (Karras 52) and is not in itself problematic. Lee C. Ramsey claims that Guy's desire for power is "an unattractive

quality, and in the medieval context [...] a deadly sin," but Guy's own experiences during his first excursion do not bear Ramsey's interpretation out (59). Guy wins his first tournament and the love of maiden Blancheflour in short order (825) and goes on to win every other tournament in which he participates (883-4). It is tempting to read Guy's acceptance of the "present/fram þe maiden Blancheflour" (824-5) as a transgression of his love for Felice and therefore emblematic of the "unattractiveness" that Ramsey reads into Guy's desire, but these acts would not have been seen as a transgression by a contemporary audience. Adoring gazes, a lady's love, or even a love token—if obtained due to one's performance in a tournament—are, according to Karras, not to be understood as signs of the female's sexual desire (48). Instead, these displays take on a symbolic importance that bolsters the knight's "wealth, nobility and prowess" within his homosocial sphere which, in turn, increases his reputation among other knights (48). Guy's acceptance of Blancheflour's love would reinforce rather than transgress his love for Felice. This also seems to be the way that Guy's success is interpreted by his family and his country (921-4). Guy's performance does not satisfy Felice, however, who is willing to calls him "leman" based on his success, but says she will grant him her love only once he proves himself to be the best knight "vnder heuen" (967).

Felice's further demands bring to light two problems with the conventions of courtly love, one related to the importance of secrecy and the other to medieval gender

narratives. Karras argues that, since prowess by necessity earns love, "the lady who does not grant it where it is deserved does wrong; she has little choice in this understanding of the game" (52). This argument holds true when dealing with public displays of love—say, in the case of a tournament—that are symbols innocently intended to increase the man's reputation, but it causes problems when combined with the secrecy that courtly love demands. In the case of a private love, the woman is capable of withholding love even when it is merited based on the criteria of courtly love. It is true that Felice may be considered "wrong" by courtly conventions for withholding her love from Guy, but the lack of a defined metric or social pressure enables her to redefine her criteria. This restraint from giving Guy the love he deserves does not mean that Felice is a monster who wants Guy to suffer. Medieval gender narratives force women to refuse any advances—romantic or otherwise—made by men (Sylvester 137). This narrative problem, it seems, can only be solved in two ways: the knight either has to make repeated appeals to pressure the lady until she relents and gives him her love, or he must attempt to attain an even greater greatness. Of course, this problem is eventually resolved in Guy by the intervention of Felice's father, but at the present point in the narrative Guy's individual agency is again limited due to courtly convention.

Ramsey's critique of Guy's sinful desire for power gains more traction during Guy's second outing. Though anachronistic, the 1475 Boke of Noblesse is useful in

explaining the difference between Guy's first and second outing. In the book, there is a clear distinction made between manliness (courage) and boldness (foolhardiness), which according to Karras emphasizes "that taking up every challenge, no matter how unreasonable, is not courage but foolhardiness, and is unmanly" (40). Guy has already proven to be an extremely formidable knight: the poet tells us that "Þer nas noiþer turnament no burdis/ Þat Gij þerof no wan þe priis" (883-4). He has won tournaments across continental Europe and would doubtlessly be a fit match for the daughter of an earl, but his blind pursuit of Felice's love and his subordinate position to her entices him to become bold rather than manly. Despite appeals from Guy's father, mother, and from the earl that it would be foolish for Guy to leave again so suddenly, he leaves regardless—driven by his desire to earn Felice's love (1005, 1039-42). O'Donohue sees this reckless drive as a constitutive element of the lover's passion, particularly in romances dealing with transgressive loves (14).

I want to focus on two events that demonstrate the range of failures in Guy's second excursion: the near death of his foster father Herhaud and Guy's slaying of Florentin's son. In the first incident—the near death of Herhaud after he receives a blow from Gauter—it is perhaps difficult to lay the blame on Guy, but it is important to note that a) Herhaud is the agent behind Guy's return to Warwick after his first excursion, b) the fight in which Herhaud nearly dies occurs very shortly

after Guy decides to leave Warwick prematurely, and c) Guy's speech after seeing Herhaud struck down suggests that he feels partially to blame: "for a couward ich held þe;/Þou slouȝ him & lete me be" (1255-6). Guy frames the incident as a juxtaposition between himself and Herhaud, implying that were Gauter not a "couward," he would have attacked Guy instead—seeing that he is a greater threat. In framing it this way, Guy implicitly suggests that he sees his status as knight to be a danger to those around him. This juxtaposition between his life and Herhaud's is repeated twice in the lament he performs over his body. Guy says "For me þou hast þi liif forgon" (1377) and then wishes "þat þai hadde yslawe me & leten þe oliue be" (1383- 4). Excepting his illness, this scene is the first time we see Guy recognize the negative consequences of his attempts to earn Felice's love.

The scene in which Guy slays Florentin's son is depicted much differently. Guy is no stranger to slaying people for relatively minor transgressions—take, for example, when he kills the Byzantine steward Morgadour for killing his lion and as an excuse to get out of an undesired marriage (4035). Florentin's son, however, is killed merely because he is unwilling to give his horse up to Guy, who is trespassing on his father's land (6415-25). Once accused of killing Florentin's son, Guy insists that "ȝif ich þi sone owhar aslouȝ/It was me defendant anouȝ" (6505- 6) and proceeds to kill all of the accusers that rush at him before attempting to make his case to Florentin. Even the poet seems to be conflicted in his depiction of these events—he

describes Florentin's grief at length, but also states that "Þe kniȝtes he slouȝ þere/ [were] Þe best þat in þat court" and insists that Guy is "manliche" for taking them on (6523-5). This narrative juxtaposition again suggests an implicit relationship between Guy's stalwart knightliness and his ability to inflict harm on others.

All of these excursions were undertaken so that Guy would be worthy of winning Felice's love, but that illusion is shattered as soon as they are married in the beginning of the stanzaic Guy. In fact, the couple are married for no more than fifteen days—enough time to feast for fourteen days and to conceive a child—before "Her joie turned hem into care" (227). There are numerous indications that Guy's guilt is interwoven with his past deeds—he realizes that he has killed people without cause, that he is to blame for distress and war, and swears to go barefoot (250-63). His decision to go barefoot stands in contrast to his couplet Guy claim "Þat he schuld fer o fot gon" before killing Florentin's son over a horse (6410). Guy's decision to repent his life as a knight and devote his life to God is easily justified through an evaluation of his previous actions, but his decision to abandon that life comes at a critical time when reading his actions through the ideals of courtly love. It is not until he "neyghed" his love object sexually that he realizes that he was so blinded by love that he has committed great evils (224, 282-5). The character of the shift in their relationship bears a striking resemblance to the theories of Lewis and Ramsey detailing the connection between passionate love, marriage,

adultery, and the experience of guilt (Lewis 14, 37, Ramsey 98).

From the point of view of the contemporary aristocratic audience of the romance, "where marriage does not depend upon the free will of the married," Lewis argues, any "noble form" of love in which the lovers are enabled to choose one-another would flirt with conceptions of adultery (37). This theory, I believe, explains the timing of Guy's sudden shift of attention away from matters of love and toward God. Once Guy obtains the object of his passionate love and consummates his marriage, he "had no choice between 'guilty' or innocent love before him" he could only repent or accept his guilt (Lewis 14). Ramsey takes a slightly different approach and arrives at a similar end, arguing that romances' "appeal is obviously to an audience that had come to see sexual relationships as a means to self-achievement, self-knowledge, and identity but was troubled by many of the implications of this view" (99). The transition present in the stanzaic Guy of Warwick seems to offer commentary on the problematic aspects of materialistic aspirations and self-aggrandizement that can often be hidden under the guise of courtly love or sexual relationships in romance literature. While Lewis seems to think that the connection between courtly love and adulterous guilt is absolute, Ramsey offers a different approach, arguing that romances typically have two ways to operate around this problem: they can either have the hero take "the symbol for the object itself" and translate the hero's aspirations for power into sensual desire, or they

can "end by destroying the guilt-laden hero" (98). The stanzaic Guy, through Ramsey's reasoning, should be seen as a long-winded destruction of the hero that was constructed in the couplet Guy. But what of those romances in which Ramsey argues the hero takes "the symbol for the object itself" (98)? For that we turn to Fabliaux.

Sylvester notes that while romances "provide cover stories for sexual desire" and focus on the social aspects of sexuality, "the well-springs of fabliaux are [...] full of sensory pleasure, and sexuality is the main component of fabliau hedonism" (134). Per Nykrog emphasizes the role that fabliaux play as "comments on courtly customs" and argues that fabliaux and romances were typically enjoyed by the same audience (Sylvester 132-4). In the spirit of Nykrog's claims, I would like to finish the current investigation of Guy of Warwick's critique of courtly and romantic love by briefly comparing it to the fabliau Romance of a Knight and of his Lady and of a Clerk. Nykrog argues that many of the characters in fabliaux suffer from having read—and internalized—too many romances (Sylvester 133), and it is in this hyperbolic atmosphere that the negative elements of love can be allowed to come into sharpest contrast. Specifically, I will be looking at the treatment of two aspects of courtly love that are present in both texts: love sickness and the binding powers of love.

Unlike Guy's love sickness, which is depicted in earnest, the illness that the clerk in Romance of a Knight

experiences is not allowed to be taken at face value. The illness is introduced by the poet as "pure folly" on the part of the clerk rather than an uncontrollable consequence of love (120), and the lady pokes fun at the difference between love sickness and genuine sickness by suggesting that she is unable to cure the illness by empirical means (303-7). This distinction suggests an awareness of the artificiality of courtly love discourse as present in romances—in the fabliau there is no confusion between the symbols and objects of passionate love. The fabliau relies instead on the artificial language of courtly love to conceal the lovers' intent. Framed in this way, the clerk's sudden revival "[a]s if he hadn't a problem in his body" (384) problematizes Guy's similar recovery once Felice outlines how he is to obtain her love. If Guy's sickness is similarly exaggerated by an artificial model of noble love, his sufferings and those of his family are unnecessarily severe.

Likewise, the restriction of agency due to the confines of courtly love is depicted as artificial in the fabliau. The lady's treatment of her disguised lord and her willingness to have sex with the clerk until he is exhausted suggest that she desires the adulterous affair proposed by the clerk (474-85, 506). The ultimatum by the clerk that she either loves him (i.e. has sex with him) or he will die gives the requisite framework to allow her desires to be fulfilled in a way that roughly conforms to gender narratives (Sylvester 137). This capacity for love to grant freedom while appearing to restrict, following O'Donoghue (13), also

appears to manifest itself in Guy's attainment of social mobility through love.

While love can provide a certain amount of freedom, the actions undertaken with that freedom are subject to further confinements. In the stanzaic Guy, Guy states that the evil actions during his previous expeditions were undertaken while "love me had so ybounde/that never sethen no dede Y gode" (282-3). Any advantage that he could have possibly obtained through the model of courtly—or passionate—love is undercut by the evils that that same model drove him to commit. Guy of Warwick, when taken as a whole, seems to comment on the fundamental incompatibility of conceptions of romantic love and medieval religious doctrine. It is telling that these two dominant forces in medieval culture rarely meet and are never able to be reconciled in Guy of Warwick, but are instead treated in turn. The precise timing of this turn, I have suggested, correlates with models suggested by Lewis and Ramsey that conflate ideas of passionate love, guilt, and adultery in the medieval conscience (Lewis 14, 37, Ramsey 98). Guy of Warwick seems to not only reflect the problematic elements of romantic love in the Middle Ages, but, like fabliaux, offers its own critique of these courtly conventions.

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