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"Other Wyse Then Must We Do":
Parody and Popular Narrative in
The Squyr of Lowe Degre

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Identifying humor, and especially generic parody, in medieval literary texts is a dicey proposition; one critic's "murthe" is another's "doctryne." A case in point is the late Middle English romance, *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*:

> [T]here is no ground for regarding [*The Squyr of Lowe Degre*] as a burlesque. No line can be pointed out that even hints at such an intention. Humor is conspicuously lacking throughout the piece.[1]

> [T]here is scarcely a line in *Undo Your Door* [i.e., *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*] that does not demonstrate the humorous intentions of its poet.[2]

Yet while the authors quoted above could not be farther apart in their conclusions, they are in perfect agreement on the principle that parody is a function of authorial intention. As A. S. G. Edwards (by way of refuting the parodic interpretation of *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*) puts it, "[n]otions of burlesque and parody rest on a secure sense of the text and of the firm relationship between authorial design and audience."[3] In the absence of such a secure sense, claims of parody are subjective and hence wrong. The axiom is not a logical inevitability, though, but simply an assertion that where parodic interpretation is concerned, discretion is the better part of valor. The intentions of a

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text's original author, however warped by textual transmission, remain what they were, regardless of our confidence in reconstructing them.

An unfortunate corollary to the emphasis on authorial intention is a reductively dualistic view of the forms that intention might take. The absolutist language we have already encountered ("no ground...," "no line...," "scarcely a line...") betrays the conviction that the parodic text is a thoroughgoing farce, while its "straight" counterpart lacks any trace of ironic humor. Approaches to medieval texts equate parody with a consistent, programmatic inversion of norms; the aesthetic integrity and effectiveness of a parody *qua* parody depends on the continued visibility of these normative inversions. As a result, critics readily fall prey to a kind of parody anxiety, seeking constant reaffirmation of the author's parodic—or non-parodic—intentions. When the primary materials do not lend themselves to such schismatic evaluation, strained and unpersuasive readings result.

Nowhere are the deleterious effects of this situation more evident than in the critical history of *The Squyr of Lowe Degre* (hereafter *SLD*). In what follows I will point out some of these effects, and the thinking behind them, while recommending instead an approach to parody centered on reception (medieval and, by extension of the same principles, modern) rather than production. The bulk of the essay will consist of a close examination of *SLD* itself, wherein I attempt to show how the poem effects a neat stylistic balance accommodating both of the extreme positions into which modern commentary on the text usually falls. *SLD*, I argue, employs a kind of ambivalent self-ironizing that allows the reader/auditor, through the receptive selection and emphasis of particular elements, to adopt a parodic perspective, but that does not make impossible a vicarious participation in the narrative. Still, if describing this balance is to be anything more than an ingenious means of filling in a critical pothole, it must be accompanied by an account of how such parodic equipoise might plausibly function in the poem's original receptive environment. How can a text simultaneously adhere to and poke fun at a stylistic norm without being at cross-purposes aesthetically? The answer, I think, lies in the slippery notion of popular taste, and I will end by venturing some ideas in this area. Briefly, *SLD*'s inside/outside relationship with romance anticipates a broad audience eager to be entertained but with differing ideas as to what is entertaining. A double perspective on its own generic identity provides *SLD* with a "built-in" diversity of potentially appropriate aesthetic

responses, and so helps it make an appeal to disparate tastes. If recommending this view seems to necessitate rather farfetched claims for the craftsmanship of the poem, I would point out that the same strategy is commonly in use in popular narratives (e.g., mainstream films) of our own day—so commonly, in fact, as to be virtually conventional in its own right. I will pursue the analogy with modern popular narratives in my conclusion, though the topic deserves more space than I will be able to devote to it.

Since *SLD* is generally perceived as something of a novelty, and thus more often discussed in isolation than as a representative of the romance genre, it is perhaps best to begin with a brief introduction to the poem and the critical reactions it has provoked. *SLD* is thought to be a late fifteenth-century composition, though the lack of extant manuscripts makes judgment on this point difficult.[4] The only complete surviving text is Copland's printed version (C), dated 1555–60; fragments of an earlier edition by Wynkyn de Worde (W), c. 1520, agree closely with C. There is in addition a very late, ballad-like version of 170 lines preserved in the seventeenth-century Percy Folio MS, under the title *The Squier* (P). The plot, despite being made up almost entirely of traditional romance motifs, has no close parallels in English or French. Lillian Hornstein summarizes the story as follows:

> A poor Squire loves the daughter of the King of Hungary. The Princess, accepting his love, imposes a seven-year trial period. An eavesdropping steward reports the conversation to the King. The latter declares his confidence in the Squire, but gives his men permission to capture him if he attempts to enter the lady's chamber; the Squire is ambushed as he comes at night to bid her farewell. He cries to her to open the door; she does not. The Squire slays the steward, whose disfigured body is then clad in the Squire's clothes. The Princess finds the body, believes it to be her lover's, embalms it, and keeps it at her bed's head for seven years. The Squire is imprisoned; but the King releases him under a pledge of secrecy to go abroad for seven years, with the promise that he will receive the lady and the realm when he returns. When the seven years have passed, the steward's body is dust; the princess is about to become

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[4] John Wells, apparently following Mead (lxxvi), dates the poem c. 1450 (*A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1400* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1916], 149). In the updated *Manual* (gen. ed. J. Burke Severs [New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967]), Lillian Hornstein emends this date to c. 1500 (1:157), but gives no explanation for the change.

an anchoress. Just then the Squire returns; the King, satisfied with her constancy, tells her the truth; the lovers are married.[5]

From the beginning, certain peculiarities of the poem have drawn commentators' attention. A penchant for exhaustive catalogues and long, purely descriptive passages was noted by the first modern scholars of Middle English romance, the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians, though the foregrounding of such standard romance fare impressed them differently. Thomas Percy, in a letter to Thomas Warton (June 1761), condemned *SLD*'s "prolix and unnecessary enumerations," while Joseph Ritson found the romance "strange and whimsical, but genuinely English."[6] None of these early observers, though, regarded the tale's hyper-conventionality as parodic. The burlesque reading was first ventured in 1893 by Alois Brandl, who declared the poem "a travesty of the old exile-and-return romances."[7] In 1904 William Mead's edition (still standard and the only one to include all three texts) appeared, and with it the unceremonious rejection of Brandl quoted in part at the outset of this essay. Subsequent commentary returned to the familiar pattern of praise or disapprobation of the poem's quirks.[8] Brandl's argument remained an anomalous blip in *SLD* criticism for most of the twentieth century, before being revived by Kevin Kiernan in 1973. Taking his cue from Brandl's remarks about the poem's unromance-like concern with the squire's financial situation, Kiernan judged *SLD* a comic "anti-romance" organized around "a structural motif which is a

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[5] Severs, *Manual,* 157.

[6] Thomas Percy, *The Percy Letters,* ed. M. G. Robinson and Leah Dennis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1951), 3:19; Joseph Ritson, ed., *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (1802; repr. Edinburgh, 1885), 3:139.

[7] "eine Travestie auf die alten Exil- und Rückkehrromanzen." Alois Brandl, "Mittelenglische Literatur," in *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie,* ed. Herman Paul (Strassburg, 1893), 2:697.

[8] Hornstein's 1967 assessment of *SLD* is distinctly Percy-esque: "Neither the incidents not characters develop convincingly; nor does the poet take advantage of the emotional possibilities of his material despite the use of soliloquies of unconscionable length" (Severs, *Manual,* 157). More generous evaluations can be found in P. G. Thomas, *English Literature before Chaucer* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), 116, and especially in George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1951): "[a] great part of the thousand lines of *The Squyr of lowe degre* are memorable verse. The man who composed them could write as well as Chaucer....[H]e can throw off graceful passages, both fluent and apt, in which the emotion of the story shines through the clear language" (96).

protracted distortion of medieval knighting ceremonies."[9] This time the parodic-satiric reading took hold, and has been a consistent focus for the slight body of recent work on *SLD*. Bryan Rivers extends Kiernan's argument but sees the tale as primarily satirical of the princess's virginal paranoia.[10] Huston Diehl rejects Kiernan, finding in the poem symbolic references to the life of Christ.[11] Carol Fewster interprets *SLD* not as a parody of romance per se, but more broadly as a meta-narrative simultaneously distancing itself from and selectively using romance conventions.[12] The most recent commentator, A. C. Spearing, also disdains the parodic readings, emphasizing instead how the various characters, through acts of listening and telling, compete to impose their privately constructed narratives on the text.[13]

It was, as we have seen, the superfluous inventories and digressions that first alerted readers to the possibility of parodic exaggeration in *SLD*. The mere 1132 lines of the poem are stuffed with catalogues of trees (lines 29–42), birds (43–62), "deynty meates" (317–26), treasures (717–22), musical instruments (1070–77), and other accessories typical of romance.[14] Even more prominent is the sheer volume of direct speech in the poem: characters take turns launching into extended descriptions and narratives, many of them involving catalogue-like lists (e.g., the king's inordinately detailed account of the amusements with which he intends to distract his grief-stricken daughter, lines 739–852). More than any other factor, it is this constant verbal overindulgence, so disruptive of dramatic tension and alien to modern tastes, that makes the question of parody such an insistent one in the poem's critical history. But while much of the interest in *SLD* as a parody can be traced back to the catalogues and speeches, critics have in recent decades been wary of making too much of them. Superabundance of all kinds is part of the recognized

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[9] Kiernan, 346.

[10] Bryan Rivers, "The Focus of Satire in *The Squire of Low Degree*," *English Studies in Canada* 7 (1981): 379-87.

[11] Huston Diehl, "'For No Theves Shall Come Thereto': Symbolic Detail in *The Squyr of Low Degre*," *American Benedictine Review* 32 (1981): 140-55.

[12] Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), chap. 5, esp. 136, 147–9.

[13] A. C. Spearing, The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 177–93.

[14] Text and line references for *SLD*, unless otherwise noted, follow C as printed in Mead.

generic territory of romance, making exaggeration a highly unreliable index of parodic intention. In order to communicate a subversive attitude toward norms and conventions, rather than a cloying enthusiasm for them, one must replace conventional elements with absurd substitutes such as one finds in burlesque poems like *The Tournament of Tottenham*, where peasants, wearing bowls for helmets and riding mares, battle for the hand of the local reeve's daughter.[15] Such inversions are lacking in *SLD*, justifying Wim Tigges's claim that the catalogues and general superfluity of speech are "not obviously humorous."[16] Indeed, the catalogue-like concatenations of *SLD* are so far from obviously parodic that Laura Hibbard Loomis uses one, the princess's "anaphoric farewell" in lines 941–54, to *refute* Brandl's burlesque reading.[17] As a result, commentary since Kiernan has relegated the catalogues to corroborative status, focusing more centrally on the characterizations of the squire and princess, and on the spirited but puzzling "undo your door" episode. These are best considered individually and in turn.

The critical will to a totalizing parodic perspective emerges clearly in Kiernan's argument, according to which the humor of *SLD* proceeds from a coherent portrait of the squire not as a legitimate (i.e., conventional) romance hero, but as a money-hungry mercenary. Among the relevant bits of evidence noted by Kiernan are the derogatory use of the term "squire of low degree" in late sixteenth-century sources, and the rascally figure introduced in P:

> IT was a squier of England borne,
> He wrought a forffett against the crowne,
> Against the crowne *and* against the fee:
> In England tarry no longer durst hee,
> For hee was vexed beyond the fome
> Into the kings land of Hungarye. (1–6)

We can see from both that the squire became a rogue-character in the fullness of time—an interesting fact, though of course it proves nothing with respect to our texts. We have no way of knowing if the textual tradition represented by P was coeval with C/W, or a later

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[15] See Norman Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (1977; repr. London and New York: Methuen, 1979), 116–27.

[16] Wim Tigges, "Romance and Parody," in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. H. Aertsen and A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU Univ. Press, 1990), 143.

[17] Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Mediæval Romance in England* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1924), 264.

deviation.[18] If the squire-as-criminal-fugitive motif was "alive" in the Middle English period, the fact of its exclusion in *SLD* would seem, if anything, to contradict Kiernan's point. Why would a fundamentally parodic portrayal of the squire omit such an anti-heroic detail? If it arose later, the most we can say is that something in the earlier version(s) of the *SLD* story made the title character amenable to subsequent rogue-ification.

It is surely no leap to conclude that this "something" is connected with the squire's "lowe degre." Of course, the socially disadvantaged suitor is such a recognizable hallmark of romance as to be practically definitional, so a parodic design cannot be inferred from the premise alone. But unlike heroes of the "fair unknown" breed, the squire is not secretly of noble birth; his apparent condition is his *real* condition. Probably the closest parallels to the squire's situation among Middle English romances occur in *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Eglamour*. Though both heavily thematize the relative social inferiority of the hero, they also insist that he is, even at the outset, of considerable means and station. Guy's superlative pedigree is established early on,[19] while Eglamour, already a knight, has both an exemplary reputation and ample money to lavish on his lady's attendants.[20] The squire, lacking these basics, would seem hopelessly out of social striking distance. In Kiernan's view, in fact, the absence of a conventional family history is one of the ways the poem initially signals its ironic intentions to the audience.[21] This is negative evidence, of course—and there are plenty of romances that forgo the hereditary résumé—but not without corroborative power.

The contract-and-fulfillment plot provides another example of *SLD*'s skewed treatment of standard narrative devices. Like Guy and Eglamour, the squire is given a set of chivalrous goals to achieve over a certain period of time (the usual seven years), with the understanding that upon completion of these terms he will receive the princess and the realm as compensation. With the other romances, though, the contract is primarily a catalyst for the narrative, while the real interest lies in the serial adventures that follow. The reverse seems to be true of *SLD*, where the central conflict is over by the time the

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[18] On the relationship and chronology of the versions, see Mead, xix–xxv.

[19] *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS e.s. 42, 49, 59 (London, 1883, 1887, 1891; repr. as one vol., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), lines 109ff.

[20] *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, ed. Frances Richardson, EETS 256 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), lines 92–5, 172–7.

[21] Kiernan, 347–8.

squire's career officially gets under way. The full seven years between his departure from Hungary and his return are covered in seventeen lines (884ff.). No battles or other exploits are described, and the squire's successes are treated as a perfunctory interruption in the convoluted palace politics with which the rest of the poem is concerned. Such a reversal of romance priorities indeed suggests an element of anti-heroism in the portrait of the squire. At the same time, the initial description of the squire tells us he was "An hardy man...and wight, / Both in batayle and in fyght" (9–10);[22] he manages to defend himself against thirty-four attackers, killing eight including his major adversary; and his eventual knightly accomplishments, though underreported, seem genuine. As with the too-conspicuous but otherwise conventional catalogues, the squire's non-heroism is a matter of narrative emphasis. Unlike a bald burlesque, and to the consternation of critics who would prefer that it be one, *SLD* communicates the possibility of parody not so much by exploding the heroic qualities we might expect the squire to demonstrate (though there are examples of this as well), as by evincing a thorough lack of interest in them.

Of course, the manipulative rogue is only one of several possible stand-ins for the virtuous hero of romance. Another—and we should allow these basic types considerable overlap—is the well-intentioned but foppish pretender, à la (following the popular wisdom) Chaucer's Sir Thopas. In *SLD*, two possible instances of parodic substitution in this direction command our attention. The first occurs in lines 305–12, where the squire, after accepting the princess's love-pledge, dresses to perform his duties at the king's table. Kiernan thinks his costume a ludicrously "dandified" response to the recent turn in his fortunes.[23] While I leave the argument to those better versed in the minutiae of squirely attire, the brevity of the scene in a romance celebrated for exhaustive description casts doubt on the point. Kiernan notes that the squire's donning of the livery comes ironically on the heels of the elaborate verbal equipping he receives from the princess (lines 203–32), but does not make the more general connection with the traditional romance arming motif. Reading these lines as an

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[22] These lines are emblematic of the confusing quasi-conventionality of *SLD*. While they could not be more formulaic, they are also at the least premature, since there is no reason to suppose the squire's earlier life had involved any battle experience. Unthinking quotation of generic language, or deft parodic stroke?

[23] Kiernan, 358–9.

example of parodic substitution (livery for armor) makes the demonstration of exaggeration (a parody of the livery *as livery*) inessential, putting the case for parody on ground firmer than Kiernan provides, and indeed firmer than that supplied for the parallel passage in *Sir Thopas*.[24]

After outfitting himself, the squire appears in the hall and begins serving the assembled lords. The impression he makes on the king constitutes the second relevant passage:

> The kynge behelde the squyer wele,
> And all his rayment every dele,
> He thoughte he was the semylyest man
> That ever in the worlde he sawe or than.
> Thus sate the kyng and eate ryght nought,
> But on the squyer was all his thought. (333–8)

The oddness of the king's reaction has often been remarked, though not persuasively explained.[25] Closest to the mark is Fewster, who observes that while the sentiments are conventional, it is the squire who should be having, not inspiring, them (or at any rate, not inspiring them in the king):

> [T]he device of hero falling in love with heroine, or vice versa, at a feast scene recurs in romance, and often initiates adventures. But although the *Squyr* uses the stylistic and structural markers of romance to describe this scene, it makes a dislocation between the subject and the language felt to be appropriate to that subject: the lines refer to the king, not to the hero and heroine.[26]

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[24] See Fragment 7, lines 857–87 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 215. John Manly, in "*Sir Thopas*: A Satire," *Essays and Studies* 13 (1928): 70–1, makes the basic argument for parody in Chaucer's handling of this motif. The realism of the passage is defended in Stephen J. Herben, Jr., "Arms and Armor in Chaucer," *Speculum* 12 (1937): 478–81, and J. A. Burrow, "Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and *La Prise de Nuevile*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984): 53.

[25] Diehl, who sees the squire as a type of Christ, thinks the example of the squire's humble service "moves all the men gathered for the feast to a strange, mystical love" (147). Kiernan says only that "[t]he king is so impressed...that he even loses his appetite" (359). In Spearing's estimation, the king's gaze silently communicates the inner construction of his own ultimately triumphant narrative (183, 189)—an interesting interpretation, but one that misses or ignores the echo of the love-sickness motif discussed below.

[26] Fewster, 130.

Yet for Fewster, who is unsympathetic to parodic readings of *SLD*, this dislocation is simply one of the ways in which the poem at once alludes to and retreats from mainstream romance. Parody cannot be so easily disposed of, however, for if we agree that such a dislocation is operative, we must pursue the point and ask what effect it would have had on an audience familiar with the original motif. With romance lovers, it is most often the hero, rather than the heroine, who is smitten with the kind of goggle-eyed infatuation the king seems to fall prey to in the lines above;[27] when the hero is of the "lowly suitor" type, this may be assumed universally true. In this instance, though, the king displaces the squire from subject (lover) to object (loved), anti-heroically feminizing him in a way that recalls criticism of *Sir Thopas*.[28] For an audience appreciative of this reshuffled equation, the most likely effect is one of humor. Indeed, with the implied homoeroticism of the inverted motif delivering an additional joke at the expense of both king and squire, it is hard to see what other response could have been intended or achieved. Again, however, there is little consistency in the author's use of such techniques. Those whose approval of the present reading depends on further evidence of a feminized squire will, I think, be disappointed.

The characterization of the princess has similar, though perhaps more easily reconciled, ambiguities. Rivers considers her the main object of satire, on account of what he sees as her terrified retreat from male sexuality as represented by the squire. In managing to interpret almost all the princess's words and actions in terms of a transparently Freudian effort to "repress and evade" the threat to her virginity,[29] Rivers blatantly exhibits certain critical tendencies more quietly present in other parodic readings: he does not consider other possible explanations and weigh them against his own; he feels compelled to demonstrate a uniformity of treatment even in the face of contrary or inconsistent local details; and he ignores complex issues

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[27] See Mead's list, 65.

[28] The effeminacy of Thopas's appearance is a critical commonplace; see especially Carroll Camden, Jr., "The Physiognomy of Thopas," *Review of English Studies* o.s. 11 (1935): 326-30; and Laura H. Loomis, "*Sir Thopas*," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941), 504. On Thopas as homosexual (and stand-in for Richard II?), see George Williams, *A New View of Chaucer* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1965), 145–51.

[29] Rivers, 384.

of romance conventionality when expedient for his argument.[30] A
single example should serve to highlight the last of these problems. In
Rivers's analysis, the princess

> attempts to mask her inhibitions behind the stylized posturings of
> courtly love, accepting the squire as a suitor but manipulating the
> conventions of the code in order to keep him at a respectful dis-
> tance. Thus most of the poem's somewhat sardonic humour is de-
> rived from the ongoing disparity between her romantic
> declarations and her pragmatic behaviour.[31]

Rivers is right, to be sure, that the princess quickly formalizes her
relationship with the squire according to the conventions of the
courtly love code. What he neglects to explain is why keeping the
squire "at a respectful distance" involves a *manipulation* of these con-
ventions. The supposed "disparity between her romantic declarations
and her pragmatic behaviour" is, from the perspective of romance
conventionality, quite nonexistent. In the absence of obvious exag-
geration, Rivers's reading is methodologically unsound, since it un-
necessarily posits ulterior motives for behavior already explicable
through simple compliance with generic codes. Of course, the imper-
turbable chastity of the romance heroine is as fit a subject as any for
parody, but if the necessary tampering with norms of courtly behav-
ior is to be attributed to the heroine herself, it must be distinguish-
able from direct observance of those norms.

Fewster's contribution better matches the complexities of the
portrait. She identifies the princess as a romance *reader*, who

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[30] To be fair, overlooking the possible conventionality of certain passages or plot de-
vices is characteristic of arguments both for and against parody. In the former category
is Kiernan, who detects humor in the princess's recommendation that the squire prove
himself by braving the elements (he is to ride "Over hylles and dales, and hye moun-
taines, / In wethers wete, both hayle and raynes," and sleep each night in his armor
"under a tre, / Among the beastes wyld and tame" [lines 177–8, 180–1]). Kiernan sug-
gests that such a "glorified camping trip" lampoons the more rigorous (i.e., combat-
studded) errantry of real quest-romances (356), without acknowledging conventional
references to environmental hardships in the genre—the best known appearing in *Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight*, 726–32 (eds. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 1925;
2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967]). Equally guilty is
Diehl, whose analysis of the false steward as a Judas-figure (147–51) does not take into
account the ubiquity of the "treacherous steward" in Middle English romance; see en-
try K2242 in Gerald Bordman's *Motif-Index of the Middle English Metrical Romances*, FF
Communications 190 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1963), 58–9.
[31] Rivers, 379–80.

> summarises romance norms, and looks back to previous romance
> texts....Her role is of generic importance—she encodes the norms of
> romance as a reader of previous romances, and directs this poem
> from within to follow those earlier texts....[32]

In other words, the princess is aware of her role as romance heroine
and, seizing the opportunity presented by the squire's declaration of
love, tries self-consciously to make the ensuing narrative conform to
generic expectations. Again, because Fewster equates parody with
single-minded mockery, she does not explore just how easily her in-
sight may be elaborated into a full-blown parodic characterization
(she notes only "a degree of generic ambivalence"). To see the prin-
cess's virtually incessant quotation of romance norms as part of a co-
herent strategy of characterization requires initially identifying her
less as a "true" romance heroine than as one of the bored women of
rank who, according to many contemporary sources and modern
scholars, comprised in large part the genre's audience.[33] From such a
perspective, the princess, her ennui interrupted by the squire's com-
plaint in the garden, recognizes the conventionality of the situation,
and eagerly pursues the adventurous romance possibilities it offers by
providing an idealized romance blueprint for the squire to follow.
The humor derives from the audience's recognition of the princess's
deliberate role-playing, and perhaps from a sense that the squire's ir-
recuperable low degree vitiates her enthusiastic but naïve efforts.

The obvious objection to this is that romances in general are
palpably meta-fictive, continually referencing their own status as
texts through tags like 'in romance as we rede' and 'so sayeth
the boke'; we should beware of promulgating the same kind of tautology
so recently condemned in Rivers. Once more, the opening of *Guy of
Warwick*, with the heroine enjoining upon the hero chivalrous ad-
ventures for the purpose of proving his worth, provides an instruc-
tive comparison. Guy, having to his mind established his credentials
by being dubbed, and thus returning to Felice to claim her love, is
disabused of his optimism:

> Yet hast thou noo thing of armes wroughte.
> Noo better though are neu*er*e a dele
> Than thou were before, y preoue it wele,
> Bot oonly that thou hast newe dobbyng,

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[32] Fewster, 142.
[33] See, e.g., Lee Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England*
(Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), 9–10.

> And knyght art cleped withoute lesyng.
> Bot whan y may wite and see
> That though hast in torment*is* bee,
> That thou hast knyghtes nome,
> Castell*is* and Toures oue*re*come,
> And thurgh all the londe and Contree
> Thy knyghthode full good knowen bee,
> And that it bee for thy myghte
> And than thou may aske me loue with righte. (Caius MS, 736–48)

Felice here communicates her expectations with admirable precision, even including examples of the kinds of accomplishments by which a suitable reputation is to be made. Such a list is surely unnecessary, since anyone with even a superficial knowledge of romance conventions can already anticipate Guy's impending exploits, and in fact the Auchinleck text omits lines 741-6. Their presence in Caius 107 is thus a self-referential romance marker, a way of foregrounding generic identity by recalling the basic narrative components of romance and confirming that *Guy* will sound the familiar notes. When we turn to the princess's parallel exhortations in *SLD*, however, this explanation no longer suffices. The problem is not simply the length of the princess's monologue, though its 127 lines are more than enough to raise a critical eyebrow. While Felice refers to a few staple narrative patterns of quest-romance, *SLD*'s princess invokes the entire range of generic motifs and clichés, including those relevant to her own part as romance heroine. Her inventory of convention, itself a kind of catalogue, includes the treacherous steward (lines 161ff.);[34] the journey through the wilderness (175–85, 237); the seven-year separation (186, 275ff.); the sea-crossing (187, 235); the threefold test (200ff.; cf. *Sir Eglamour*); the pilgrimage/adventure in the Holy Land (233–46);[35] and her own attendant chastity (277–8). The whole speech is littered with the kind of quasi-conventional details (the squire is to undertake battles "Throughout the land of Lumbardy," 191) one would expect to encounter during the course of the adventures themselves, not in a narrated preview. Nor are the motifs alluded to exclusively narrative, as with *Guy*. Central to the passage is the extravagant account of the squire's (as yet nonexistent) shield and

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[34] As Fewster points out (142), this passage occurs before the steward has been introduced as an actual character.

[35] The inclusion of this motif, usually reserved as a capstone for the hero's career (e.g., *Sir Degrevant, Sir Perceval*), among the squire's projected early campaigns may be a sly indicator of the princess's imperfect digestion of romance materials.

armor, which is not just an allusion to such standard descriptions but a literal example of one, and among the most meticulous at that. Thus, the potential generic parody at this point in the poem relies less on the mere piling up of romance conventions, which may be deliberately exaggerated but cannot be assumed so, than on the fact that they receive their fullest treatment in the princess's imagination. When the squire finally does enter upon his seven-year expedition (881–900), the equipment he (presumably) receives from the king is not described, and though he performs "Right as the kinges doughter bad him don" (896), his authentic feats occupy only about one-fourth the space of the princess's anticipatory version of them.

We have come nearly as far as we safely may in expanding Fewster's provocative ideas about the function of the princess in *SLD*. As a final volley, however, I offer a reading of an apparently offhand remark that, if accepted, verifies what has already been said and makes a humorous effect unavoidable. Near the end of her oration, after having delightedly projected a time when the now-proven squire will be rewarded with her hand and the kingdom both, the princess interjects the comment, "And if we may not so come to, / Other wyse then must we do" (267–8). This cryptic remark is significant enough for her to repeat in a similar context three hundred lines later.[36] Interestingly, it is the second occurrence that Mead glosses, with the paraphrase, "[i]f they [her 'kynne,' here obviously the king] refuse, you shall win me in another way, by proving yourself a man on the field of war."[37] Taken on its own, nothing in this latter instance contradicts Mead's reading, though the explanatory clause "by proving yourself a man on the field of war" is purely editorial and not found in the text. Logically the fit is poor, however. The princess cannot plausibly be suggesting that the squire is already in a position to request her hand, without yet having tilted a lance; earlier both squire (125–6) and princess (164ff.) fear such presumption punishable by death. The question to this point has always been whether the squire can hope to stake a claim, despite his lowly origins, *after having proved* his valor. Such is unambiguously the situation when the remark is made the first time:[38]

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[36] The exact wording the second time is "And yf ye may not do so [i.e., win a "graunt" from the king], / Otherwise ye shall come to," 587–8.

[37] Mead, 73.

[38] Mead evades this fact in his notes by simply referring the reader to the later example (61).

> I praye to God and Our Lady,
> Sende you the whele of vyctory,
> That my father so fayne may be,
> That he wyll wede me unto thee
> And make the king of his countre.... (257–61)

Two unhappy results are possible: the squire may fail to win suffi-
cient glory in battle, or he may succeed but have his petition rejected
anyway. In either event, the pair must then do "other wyse." But
what "other wyse" does the princess have in mind? Whether due to
lack of breeding or battle prowess, the squire's failure would be ir-
reparable, cancelling out the possibility of any "legitimate" match be-
tween the two. With this in mind, "other wyse" would seem to
suggest a liaison of a less official sort. For the princess this implies
not so much wantonness as a retreat from the idealized romance
aether in which she habitually moves—an abrupt if momentary dis-
sociation, as though she were temporarily stepping out of character
and acknowledging, with a shrug of her shoulders, the mundane exi-
gencies of a world outside romance. The line can thus be read as a
comic deflation of the princess's usual parroting of romance norms,
but is not presented in such a way as to foreclose other possibilities.
Like the text as a whole, the reference to an ambiguous "other wyse"
is adroitly open-ended, creating an interpretive space that the reader
is free to fill in with an aesthetically desirable meaning (in oral recita-
tion, all would hinge on the delivery of the line).

Thus far our efforts to delineate possible parodic characteriza-
tions of the squire and princess have concentrated primarily on the
early portions of *SLD*, avoiding the central episode with which ar-
guments on both sides of the parody issue have inevitably grappled,
usually with a fair bit of frustration: the pivotal "undo your door"
scene (lines 501–660). The aptness of our suggested portrayals will be
most apparent when tested against this bizarre passage. A major rea-
son why modern readers have found the scene so difficult to inter-
pret is that so much of the action in it lacks a conspicuous motive.
The squire, having set out on his journey and "ryden but a whyle
(489)," suddenly reverses course and comes back alone to bid his lady
a midnight farewell.[39] Announcing himself at her door, he is am-

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[39] Kiernan finds this development further evidence of parody (360), but in so doing
rather lazily equates inscrutability with humor. Though the squire's motivation is un-
clear, it is worth noting, in light of the fabliau-like incidents it precipitates (see below),
that his clandestine return parallels the fabliau motif in which a jealous husband, after a

bushed by the waiting steward and his men. He tries to communicate
the situation to the princess, who responds not by letting him in, but
by reiterating much of her earlier speech in what is ostensibly in-
tended as a kind of pep talk. The steward is killed in the following
mêlée; his men, for obscure reasons, disfigure his face, outfit him
with the squire's armor, and deposit him outside the princess's
chamber before dragging the hapless squire to an audience with the
king. The purpose of any of this has long been a crux of *SLD* criti-
cism. Mead, for whom the suggestion of burlesque is anathema, con-
cludes that the princess's entire discourse (lines 571–636) is an
interpolation.[40] Spearing is able to make sense of the events only by
positing the poet's intention to leave us as "excluded observers" or
"listeners who do not hear all we wish and must struggle to interpret
what we do hear."[41] At the same time, critics who do read the epi-
sode as humorous offer radically different interpretations of what is
going on. Kiernan thinks the joke lies in the juxtaposition of the
princess's enraptured verbal meanderings with the squire's increas-
ingly frantic pleas that she rescue him from impending death. Cer-
tainly, the comic potential of the situation is clear—so clear, in fact,
that the author's failure to exploit it fully creates a problem for Kier-
nan's argument. The humor Kiernan identifies depends on carefully
protracting the tension generated by the princess's inopportune di-
gression: we must feel the squire's mounting exasperation. This is ex-
actly the effect Kiernan himself tries to achieve in his account of the
squire's repeated requests for admittance, interlarding the squire's
lines with extrapolations on minor adjustments in his strategy.[42] In
the text itself, however, the squire unloads his appeals in quick suc-
cession (lines 534–46), before the princess has even realized who he is.
Surely the humor of the squire's plight could be better conveyed by
inserting his calls for help at intervals throughout the princess's
speech, and it is hard to accept that such a basic comic structure
would not suggest itself to an author whose main objective is to cul-
tivate a humorous effect. What Kiernan describes, then, is the bona
fide parody that could materialize but does not. The situation re-
mains more comic in the abstract than in its actual execution.

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contrived departure, reappears incognito to test his wife's fidelity. Cf. *La Borgoise
d'Orliens*.
[40] Mead, lxxxiii–lxxxv.
[41] Spearing, 184–6.
[42] Kiernan, 361.

Rivers sees the action very differently. Noting that the text does not reveal exactly when the squire becomes aware of the steward's presence, he determines that this moment has in fact *not* come when the squire claims to be "besette with many a knyfe" (line 540). For Rivers, the whole entreaty is a "blackguardly ruse" to gain access to the princess's chamber with predictably sinister intent.[43] In this view the humor depends less on the princess's reaction than the ironic backfiring of the gambit. While the suggestion does, however implausibly, resolve a peculiar omission in the sequence of events, it introduces another—namely, the absence of any visible surprise on the squire's part when his feigned attack really takes place. For the comic set-up Rivers envisions to pay off, the audience must be treated to at least a momentary glimpse of the squire as he precipitously transforms from cat to mouse. This does not happen; although the squire is captured and briefly imprisoned, it is the mangled and abandoned steward who gets much the worse of the exchange.

In terms of internal logic and motivation, the disguising of the steward's corpse as the squire's is in fact the most problematic event in the romance. Its function in the overall narrative scheme is clear: it allows the princess to demonstrate her fidelity by mourning for seven years, and it smoothes the path for a happy and thoroughly conventional reunion at the end. Still, why any of the characters would bother to carry out the hoax is unclear. The squire, a captive, is obviously not responsible. The one for whom the situation proves most advantageous is the king, who is afforded seven years in which to urge his daughter to a more socially felicitous marriage, while simultaneously allowing the squire to get some knightly credentials under his belt in case he should prove intractable. This is, at any rate, the strategy one infers from the king's second interview with the princess in lines 971–1062. While nothing in the surviving texts hints that the king, uncannily anticipating how events would unfold, orders the weird substitution in advance, such may have been a part of the story's original narrative integument.[44] Even this grossly hypothetical motive, though, emerges only in retrospect. The steward's disfigurement and disguise, when it occurs, comes as pure and (if the expression is pardonable) unmotivated motif. Of course, a medieval audience, no less than a modern reader, would have recognized the

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[43] Rivers, 382.
[44] Mead, 76; Spearing, 186.

stitching together of known motifs[45] as a basic technique of romance narrativity, and certainly not inherently parodic. Here, however, the artificiality of the technique is foregrounded in a way that goes beyond normal romance self-referentiality: the poem takes patchwork romance construction one step further by omitting the at least marginally credible sutures of inner logic that romance, like any narrative genre, requires.[46] Like the indiscriminate jumbling of clichés in the princess's earlier speech, the motiveless disguising of the steward's corpse invokes conventionality in a way that is not itself conventional. For an audience alert to the dislocation from standard romance storytelling, the resultant hyper-awareness of genre, combined with the latent humor of the surrounding incidents, would, so to speak, open the door for parodic interpretation.

As a kind of coda to the "undo your door" episode comes another which critics have, for similar reasons, felt compelled to address: the embalming of the steward's body by the princess. In 1913, B. L. Jefferson argued for the conventionality of the motif, citing examples of its use elsewhere in medieval literature.[47] Kiernan dissents, finding the embalming of the entire body (rather than just a hand or heart) a case of parodic exaggeration, and claiming that previous critics have missed the basic humor of the incident by forgetting that the princess is all the while lavishing her grief on the body of her enemy.[48] Again, however, there is enough unreflective modernism in Kiernan's reading to draw suspicion. For exaggeration to produce

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[45] One may ask, In what sense can the disguising of the steward's body, and subsequent deception, be considered a known motif? The exact circumstances are not reproduced elsewhere in Middle English romance, and indeed the originality of the device has been remarked (e.g., Loomis, *Mediæval Romance*, 265). The various narrative elements converging in this particular instance, however, are all familiar from other texts. Bordman has assembled examples under the following headings: H1556.1.2 (50) "Heroine's sincerity tested by false report of lover's death" (*King Horn, Partonape of Blois*); K1810.1.2 (55) "Exchange of clothes to affect disguise" (*Beves of Hampton, Generydes, King Horn*); K1810.1.3 (55) "Lover disguised in slain enemy's clothing" (*Ipomadon*); K1864.2.1 (57) "Corpse falsely said to be hero's by treacherous rival" (*Le Bone Florence of Rome*). It is precisely this "variation on a theme," and not the duplication of events from any other single romance, that a contemporary audience would have recognized as generic.

[46] To be more accurate, these sutures are necessary only when, as in the present situation, the sequence of events is governed by human interaction. A knight riding into a forest is, naturally, apt to encounter a string of conventional situations unrelated to his actual goal.

[47] Bernard L. Jefferson, "A Note on *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*," *Modern Language Notes* 28.4 (1913): 102–3.

[48] Kiernan, 363–4.

parody, a recognized convention must be transgressed, and the few scattered examples Jefferson provides are not contextually similar enough to establish firmly the existence of such a convention. By contrast, the conventionality of erroneous belief in a lover's death is beyond dispute,[49] so Kiernan's assumption of a comic intention behind the princess's misdirected mourning is, at the least, overeager.

What makes the embalming scene so conspicuous in the first place, though, is not its arguable conventionality but the explicit physicality of the princess's devotion to the corpse. The princess drags the dead steward into her chamber, whereupon "His bowels soone she dyd out drawe" (line 685); she then "kysse[s] that body twyse or thryse" every morning for the next seven years, at which point it is reduced to "powder small," which she "may no lenger holde...with all" (695–9, 930–2). Kiernan labels these rather unsavory images "an example of black humor in the Middle Ages at most outrageous,"[50] but we should beware of equating grotesquerie with humor—the bond between the two is a close but not ineluctable one. There is no obvious verbal humor in either the embalming scene itself or in the princess's subsequent attendance on the corpse.[51] Whether the steward's vivid evisceration and eventual decomposition would really have been "outrageous" enough to induce morbid laughter in a contemporary audience is hard to say. The graphic disembowelment of the deer and boar in *Sir Gawain* (lines 1325ff., 1605ff.) is not thought of as grotesquely comic in this way. Of course, the skillful dressing of game, unlike the embalming of a human body, is within the sphere of aristocratic leisure activities so often depicted in romance, so what might in one case be regarded simply as well-rendered realistic detail requires additional explanation in the other. Furthermore, there is in *SLD* a possible comic reversal of expectation in the fact that it is the princess—and not, as in *Gawain*, a "wyȝe...wys vpon wodcraftez" (1605)—who does the dirty work.

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[49] Bordman, H1556.1 (50), K1864.2 (57).

[50] Kiernan, 363.

[51] A valuable comparison may be made with P, which despite presenting a drastically abridged version of the story manages to capitalize on some of the comic opportunities missed in C. The steward is omitted entirely in P, and a corpse from the gallows is used in his place. As in C, the princess says daily prayers and "masses five" over what she thinks is her lover's body. The P version gently lampoons her touching but mistaken devotion with the comment, "Through the praying of our Lady alone, / Saved may be the soule of the hanged man" (107–8).

The "undo your door" scene and the following material about the steward unmistakably comprise the core of the *SLD* plot. Very little else actually happens in the story, and even those subsequent events necessitated by the logic of romance (the squire's adventures, the wedding) are treated with a brevity and lack of imagination that make it clear the narrative epicenter has been passed. As we have seen, the moment of greatest narrative interest is also the point of convergence for many of the poem's most peculiar features. Even more curiously, these features—gross physicality, risible substitutions, complicated swerves of plot, and mistaken identity—are widely characteristic of fabliaux. I would not suggest that a generic reclassification is in order for *SLD*, or that the "undo your door" passage has been lifted from a now-lost fabliau. However, it does seem that the incident, though not treated in classic fabliau style (i.e., with the comic element presiding), owes the genre a debt that bears investigation.

Even on the level of textual presentation, *SLD* seems to have at least one foot in the world of fabliau. As Kiernan observes, both the colophon to W and the incipit of C give the poem's title as *Undo Your Door*, with only C recording the alternate name "the squyer of lowe degre." The modern preference in nomenclature, he argues, reveals a dishonest critical prejudice as to the purpose of the tale: "[n]o intentionally serious romance, as modern editors seem to recognize, could have been called *Undo Your Door*."[52] A further nudge in the direction of fabliau is provided by Rivers, who points out the "obvious bawdy innuendo" of the title.[53] Indeed, the main value of Rivers's psychological approach is that it draws attention to the poem's sexual register, most relevantly in the "undo your door" episode. For instance, he attaches the proper significance, I think, to the "drawen swerd" (line 507) with which the squire approaches the princess's chamber, overshooting the mark only insofar as he interprets the sword as a sign of criminal intentionality rather than a more general cue to the libidinal motive in the scene.[54] Details like the drawn sword hint at the unapologetic sexuality of the fabliau, and so encourage the audience to adopt interpretive strategies befitting a tale conceived in that spirit: the lascivious clerk carves out a space alongside the heroic knight as a possible prototype for the squire's behav-

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[52] Kiernan, 345.
[53] Rivers, 379.
[54] Rivers, 382. For Kiernan, the sword is "an incomprehensible precaution" (360).

ior. The conspicuousness of the sexual register and the artificiality of plot developments reinforce each other at this point, making the fabliau a viable interpretive model for the episode and thus activating much of its comic potential. Fewster recognizes this shift and the generic complications it introduces:

> the battle outside the princess' chamber evokes fabliau comedy, rather than romance pathos. The *Squyr*'s potential for comic development is suggested by fabliauesque allusions, such as the treatment of this battle—a different kind of narrative possibility is continually suggested.[55]

For Fewster, however, the fact that *SLD* uses generically ambivalent narrative techniques is the all-important point; that the "different kind of narrative possibility" should be offered by fabliau is, in effect, accidental. Her analysis of the poem perceptively illustrates the ways in which romance "traditionality" may be manipulated, but says little about the effects such manipulations might be directed toward. If I am right, the broad allusion to the romance-turned-inside-out world of the fabliau in this climactic scene is one more means by which the parodic suggestiveness of *SLD* informs the act of reception. By creating an environment associated with comedy but backing off from a full-blown comic treatment, the poet gestures toward possible responses without dictating one. The reader, given all the materials of a joke, is left to supply the punchline. Such a strategy cannot be reconciled with the dualistic notion of parody entertained by modern critics who resort haplessly to dogmatism. Still, there remains the question, *Why not* a single, clear purpose, self-mocking or otherwise? To what end the ambiguity?

To find an answer, we must be able to articulate an aesthetics of reception. This is a challenge best met with the foreknowledge that all conclusions will be provisional. Among medievalists clinging to limited and oblique evidence, the desire that modernity not pollute one's researches has led to an anxious retreat from, and finally a passivity in the face of, aesthetic considerations. While scholars are understandably reluctant to add another variable to a field of inquiry already dense with them, the suppression of aesthetics involves a recourse by default to assumptions that are often no less dangerous than the wrong guesses they supposedly forestall. For instance, if no one today approaches medieval literature with the expectation of an

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[55] Fewster, 146.

aesthetic experience identical to that of the posited original audience, we do tend to presume a unanimous aesthetic response *within* that audience. There can be little doubt that a large part of the aesthetic appeal of Middle English romance lay in the immediate thrill of the adventure story, and involved a primary visceral identification with the hero or heroes.[56] To conclude that this is the *only* aesthetic claim the genre could make on its audience (other than pious sentiments occasionally inspired by devotional themes) is premature, though. The pleasure of a love triumphantly affirmed or a family reunited is not the pleasure of violent hack-and-slash encounters, however much the latter contribute to the tension resolved in the former. While the elements of romance are conventional, they demand different kinds of aesthetic participation, and we can hardly allow ourselves to believe that every medieval reader/auditor had the same experience of romance, admiring the same qualities to the same degree or for the same reasons. It seems far likelier that, then as now, tastes differed, and the successful story was the one that could give a broad spectrum of people enough of what they wanted to hold their interest.

SLD's perplexing relationship to romance normativity may be the kind of a strategy that makes such a juggling act possible. Derek Pearsall mentions *SLD* as belonging to a species of romance

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[56] Peter Haidu is perhaps one who would dispute the point. In his article "Humor and the Aesthetics of Medieval Romance," *Romanic Review* 64 (1973), Haidu agrees that "the alternative of 'straight' vs. 'parody'...may not be relevant to [the romance] genre..." (68), but finds the explanation for this precisely in the proposition that medieval reception did not involve personal identification with fictional characters: "[i]f literature is directly referential, and is presented as illusion, then identification with the hero is a natural, expectable process. But if 'characters' are presented, not as illusory persons, but as meaningful or signifying entities which are functional parts of a global and independent aesthetic system, so that their immediate reference is not to the 'real' persons their mimesis might represent, but to other elements in the aesthetic system, then they are no longer potential vicarious substitutes for the reader's self. The reader does not identify with one part of the aesthetic system, he observes its totality. His sense of selfness is not forgotten or momentarily obliterated, and the risible reaction does not constitute the rejection of something he, just a moment before, was" (67). Though Haidu claims to be speaking of "the determining traditions of the Middle Ages," it is doubtful that his conclusions were reached with Middle English romance in mind. The aesthetics he envisions, which is essentially that of allegory, is much better suited to the courtly French romances, which are the subject of the book (Philippe Ménard's *Le rire et le sourire*) Haidu's article reviews.

"evidently directed at a more sophisticated bourgeois audience,"[57] and repeated references to an item entitled "vndo your dore" in the ledger of an Oxford bookseller in 1520 recommend such a profile.[58] If the primary consumers of the printed *SLD* texts were, as seems likely, reasonably well-educated and prosperous freemen and their families, what attractions would such people find in a genre whose chivalric idealism must have had, for them as for us, some of the quaint charm of the out-of-date? Action and sentiment alone are somewhat puerile satisfactions for a supposedly "sophisticated" audience, and I would suggest an additional pleasure associated with the act of participation itself—a recognition of and playful surrender to the naïve aesthetics of the romance world. The awareness of the work as a constructed aesthetic object exerts a tug away from immediate participation and toward detached evaluation. To the extent that one's response to romance is itself *geared toward this felt tug*, we may call the response a "skeptical" one. The greater one's skepticism, the more the gratifications of romance must be mediated by the knowledge of one's own willing indulgence in them. There is, I think, a kind of intuitive awareness of this process in *SLD*: the ironic undercurrents of the story feed into the remote pleasure of consentual participation in the romance experience, rewarding skepticism and so making an "old-style" tale palatable to a wider circle. While retaining the vicarious delights of the traditional romance, *SLD* glances sideways at its own generic identity, toying with generic norms and introducing jocular, fabliau-like content that, in addition to its own immediate appeal, grants the pleasure of recognizing normative inversions.

I would stress, at this point, that I do not envision a super-aware poet manipulating the text with Joycean calculation. It is far likelier that the "author" (and here we must include the chain of copyists and redactors leading up to the present texts) had no more precise guide than a basic knowledge of the codes and conventions with which prospective audiences would be conversant. Our own insecure sense of these codes and conventions, which we must tentatively reconstruct after the fact, gives *SLD*'s quasi-parodic sub-text a false sheen of technical sophistication. For contemporaries, all necessary informa-

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[57] Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Studies in Medieval English Romances*, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 12. The article originally appeared in *Mediæval Studies* 27 (1965): 91-116.

[58] Mead, xi, n. 1.

tion circulated freely in the cultural environment, and could be exploited with native-speaker fluency. The late twentieth century offers plentiful examples of generic self-parody woven into texts of otherwise serious purpose but indifferent artistic merit. I am thinking not so much of the purported descendant of medieval romance, modern fiction (though parallels could easily be found here as well), as of the perhaps more closely analogous medium of popular film. Naturally, the suggestion of any functional equivalence between Middle English romances and Hollywood movies can only be made with heavy provisions, and in the context of a limited argument; it quickly becomes ridiculous when pressed. Nevertheless, romance and film have, despite differences too obvious to mention, many similarities that make the comparison a useful one. They are alike aimed at a general audience, though individual texts may target a specific niche; each is overwhelmingly geared toward entertainment, with sporadic efforts at moral edification; they involve corporate authorship, and allow for the rewriting, adaptation, and quotation of previous texts; both are available for domestic as well as public consumption. Of course, the motion picture industry regularly disgorges outright spoofs in which reference to genre (or to specific texts) is the basic organizing principle, and is essential to the construction of meaning. Yet no one will need to be convinced that other films draw attention to their own use of generic devices in such a way as to evoke *both* the aesthetic response those devices are designed to produce *and* the potentially comic awareness of genre as such. The least "realistic" film genres—action, horror, and science fiction—are particularly apt to employ this kind of self-reference, issuing humorous commentary on cinematic clichés by winkingly trotting out the clichés themselves, or by creating the expectation of clichés that are then withheld. Moreover, there is a full spectrum of generic or intertextual allusiveness between the unself-consciously conventional and the explicitly parodic. The very gentle parody of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is accomplished not through exaggeration or conspicuous deviation from convention (the early cliffhangers it hearkens back to were often far more outrageous), but simply through the deliberate recuperation of a lapsed mode. Nearer the other end of the scale is a film like *Pulp Fiction*, where the vicarious experience the narrative might make possible competes for interest with the film's constantly reasserted metatextuality. In neither case, though, is appreciation of the film's referentiality a precondition of intelligibility or aesthetic engagement, a fact reflected in prodigious box-office returns. Of course, not all

popular narratives that operate in this way show equal skill or cleverness in execution, nor is it important for the present argument that they should. The point is that the strategy itself is a familiar one, and not, to contemporary inhabitants of the popular culture, especially remarkable in its own right.

A similar process in Middle English romance is, I maintain, a plausible and even natural outgrowth of the genre's habitual parading of conventional structures and motifs. This is not to say, though, that all romances lend themselves to the kind of multi-layered reception possible for *SLD*. A number of interrelated factors direct us to look for the ironic register primarily in the late (fifteenth-century) phase of the genre. One of these has already been mentioned: the increasing obsolescence of the feudal militarism celebrated in romance and of the chivalric ideology supporting it. Another is the rise of literacy, which, coupled with the expansion of a socially mobile bourgeoisie, allowed for the emergence of a commercial market for the romances, making text production more directly responsive to the nebulous concept of public taste.[59] That this taste should be increasingly skeptical is also explainable as a consequence of literacy, which permits reception to occur in the context of private reading. Just as the desuetude of chivalry makes romance values conspicuous by their literary fossilization, the fixity of the written text brings formulaic language and generic idioms into view as objectifiable elements of romance style. In *hearing* a romance, even if simply recited verbatim from manuscript, one associates formulaic language with a necessary and expected variability in oral composition/delivery; the "text" is experienced as an evanescent occurrence, inextricable from its performance.[60] For the private reader, however, the text is material, and can be consulted again and again in exactly the same form. With the excision of orality from the receptive process, formulaic tags and

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[59] My tidy one-sentence summary stands somewhat glibly in place of a full description of this process, which is of course impossible here. The connections between literacy, social class, and textual production and reception in fifteenth-century England are exceedingly complex, and may never be fully understood. The current state of thinking on these issues is set forth in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989); Pearsall's introduction and the contributions by C. Paul Christianson, Kate Harris, and Carol Meale are especially pertinent. See also Pearsall, "The English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," *Essays and Studies* 29 (1976): 56-83.

[60] Pearsall, "Middle English Romance and its Audiences," in *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English*, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985), 41.

constructions no longer appear as functional, organic components of storytelling, but as frozen stylistic relics. An incipiently modern receptive environment accentuates the artificiality of these devices, which may be considered—and possibly judged ridiculous—independently of "content" (narrative, ideological, thematic). The increasing prevalence of such an environment throughout the fifteenth century, and in particular among people of comparatively humble background, cannot but have had an effect on the composition of new romances like *SLD*. I do not mean to propose that fifteenth-century romances inevitably reflect the expectation of a skeptical audience, or to discount that possibility in the case of earlier romances (most of which, after all, come to us in fifteenth-century manuscripts). The suggestion, though, seems most relevant to those late poems that strike the modern reader as "curious" and "decadent," or have been interpreted as parodies, like *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, the Middle Scots *Rauf Coilyear*, and *Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle*.[61]

These late romances have not garnered much critical commentary, partly due to the widespread perception of literary decline in a post-Chaucerian age, but also because of the tendency to regard them diachronically as moribund leftovers of the fourteenth-century Middle English romance heyday, rather than synchronically as products of a culture with its own needs and preoccupations. That this should be the case attests, among other things, to a continued privileging of the originary, a habit deeply rooted in modern conditions of textuality and authorship. As an unfortunate consequence, the discussion of parody has been constrained to the sphere of production, the assumption being that a parody is "made" strictly by authorial intention. My hope is that, by placing greater emphasis on the role of reception in the aesthetic life of a text, we may avoid the methodo-

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[61] Donald Sands's edition of *Middle English Verse Romances* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) categorizes *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen* and *Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle* under "Burlesque and Grotesquerie" (323-71). On parody in *The Weddynge*, consult Robert Kindrick, "The Unknightly Knight: Anti-Chivalric Satire in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century English Literature," (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1971); in *Syre Gawene*, Kane (53) and Angela Tenga, "Parody in Two Later Middle English Romances: *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*," (Ph.D. diss., Purdue Univ., 1993); in *Rauf Coilyear*, Sidney Herrtage, ed., *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear*, EETS e.s. 39 (1882; repr. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931, 1969), vii, and Melissa Furrow, "Comic Middle English Treatments of Romance," (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 1980), 145–8. Tigges considers *The Weddynge* and *Rauf Coilyear* "comic-didactic" romances, not parodies (141–2).

logical roadblock that medievalists soon face when it becomes neces-
sary to posit a pseudo-modern author. Obviously the intentions of
those involved in the creation and perpetuation of a text are not ir-
relevant, but we should not imagine them as consistent either inter-
nally or with the modern critic's convenient but flawed distinction
between the parodic and the "straight." Whether the aesthetic homo-
geneity these categories presume ever existed is doubtful; it becomes
harder and harder to envision over the course of the fifteenth cen-
tury, as the diversification of the romance audience favored a parallel
diversification in the possible ways of enjoying the poems. Literacy,
the socio-economic progress of the middle classes, and, in London
especially, a rising cosmopolitanism in trade conspire with more
permanent variables like age and gender to make a proliferation of
individual tastes inevitable. I see a skeptical and mediated romance
experience as one likely result of these changes, and suggest that the
seemingly "on-again, off-again" parody of romances like *SLD* may be
a response to such skepticism. In these texts, the traditional struc-
tures that allow for a visceral engagement with romance are not dis-
mantled, but are adjusted in such a way as to give skeptics the
opportunity to observe romance normativity, as it were, from above.
One may accept the romance world at face value or, like *SLD*'s prin-
cess, reserve the right to do "other wyse."

There is no point in denying the element of speculation in the
receptive approach to parody I have recommended here. In writing
on popular aesthetics in the Middle Ages, one necessarily develops a
great facility with modal auxiliaries. Some ideas will need refinement,
and some may simply prove false scents. Still, rethinking medieval
parody from the standpoint of reception, aside from the light it sheds
on individual works, is valuable in at least two major respects. First,
it forces reflection on current critical practice and so smokes out in-
tellectual liabilities like the simplistic parody/non-parody dualism
mentioned above, which can govern critical discourse in insidious as
well as overt ways.[62] Second, the emphasis on reception encourages
the breakdown of another often misleading binary, that of the mod-

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[62] For instance, even scholars who acknowledge the parodic ambivalence of *SLD* are
unable to discuss it except in a language freighted with tenuousness, as if implying some
immanent aesthetic collapse. For Tigges the poem "verges on parody" (144); for Few-
ster it "teeters dangerously on the edge of comedy" (147). This kind of talk, no less
than the reductive distortions of more single-minded critics, is a token of the sharp
liminality associated with parody; one does not teeter or verge at any point on a con-
tinuum.

ern "subject" (reader) and medieval "object" (text). While we are right to see the gulf imposed by more than half a millennium of literary change as very formidable, this sense of vastness has made it easy to objectify medieval aesthetics as undifferentiated and "other." Examining romance reception as a living phenomenon, with shifts in audience makeup, the conditions of reception, and general social milieu fostering different romance experiences within the medieval period itself, is a useful corrective to this tendency. Aesthetic dislocation from Middle English romance does indeed inform our reading, but also informed contemporary reception and the production of new texts. From this perspective, our responses to Middle English romance, while not identical to those of a medieval audience, are implicated in essentially the same process, and are no less "authentic" for their lateness.

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