CHAPTER 3

LOVE AND LOYALTY IN
MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

Corinne Saunders

Précis: While Chaucer’s writing demonstrates that English romance has the potential of portraying the extremes of fin amor, the genre does not tend to do so. This chapter considers the treatment of love in a range of Middle English romances, arguing that they demonstrate a special emphasis on mutuality and trouthe.

Your yen two wol slee me sodenly;
I may the beautee of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit throught my herte kene.

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thank to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.1

There is no certain manuscript evidence that Chaucer wrote these lyrics, and yet their superb poise, beauty, and wit cannot but affirm that he was their author. It is not just the formal craft and elegance that persuade, but also the striking combination of haunting sadness with the humorous self-depiction of the narrator. The intersection of courtly artifice with realism, the blend of experience and authority, in many ways define Chaucer’s originality; along with writers such as Gower and Langland, Chaucer was making of English poetry a newly sophisticated literary language. Yet it is not coincidental that he places himself as following in the footsteps of the great classical writers, or that French, Italian and classical works, rather than English ones, provide his chief inspiration. The abortive Tale of Sir Thopas clearly suggests Chaucer’s mocking view of English metrical romance. In the triple roundel of “Merciles Beaute,” Chaucer draws

H. Cooney (ed.), Writings on Love in the English Middle Ages
© Helen Cooney 2006
conspicuously on the conventions of French courtly poetry. Yet in his characteristic balance of crafted courtliness with humor through the addition of the comic final lyric, perhaps we may see too Chaucer’s debt to a more mixed, English tradition. By the period in which Chaucer was writing, Middle English romances can already reflect a desire to play with and infuse new life into convention, and hence a realism and social relevance that often involves a special focus on notions of *trouthe* or loyalty. This emphasis may particularly be seen in the ways that the romances treat love and gender relations—always a touchstone, if not the exclusive focus, of romance, but rarely the high-flown courtly subject matter we might expect.

The question of whether love is characterized in these works in some distinctively “English” way is problematized by the difficulty of generalizing about *fin amor* in medieval writing, and the critical debate which has surrounded the concept. The French scholar Gaston Paris (1883) identified a distinctive medieval mode of love, which he termed *amour courtois*; W.G. Dodd wrote on the English treatment of the phenomenon in *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower* (1913); and C.S. Lewis took up this notion with special reference to the thirteenth-century treatise of Andreas Capellanus, *De Amore*, to argue compellingly that medieval literature depicted “love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love”—though in its ideal form, this love would not be consummated, but would echo, for instance, Dante’s sublime love for the celestial Beatrice. For Lewis, the great medieval examples are Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde, Troilus and Criseyde, and the celebration of such love is always shadowed by a sense of transience and human frailty.

Lewis’s role in illuminating the complexities and delicacies of medieval writing cannot be overestimated, but the difficulties with his theory are well known: particularly problematic is the notion of love as a fixed religion, despite the fact that Andreas Capellanus’s rules of love were not widely circulated beyond male, clerical readers, and the insistence on adultery, causing the many depictions of married love in medieval literature to be dismissed as poor shadows of the real thing. E. Talbot Donaldson writes sceptically, “courtly love provides so attractive a setting from which to study an age much preoccupied with love that if it had not existed scholars would have found it convenient to construct it—which, as a matter of fact, they have, at least partially, done.” Donaldson emphasizes the idiosyncrasy of Andreas Capellanus and the fact that *amour courtois* was not a current medieval term, and remarks the “spell” that Lewis’s definition has cast on readers, obscuring the truth that “there is very little adultery” in medieval literature. The term *fin amor* seems preferable in that it implies a set of