

The twin demons of aristocratic society in *Sir Gowther*

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Sir Gowther is a 700-line narrative probably originating (in its Middle English form) about 1400 in the North Midlands. It is extant in two mildly divergent manuscript texts, which will here be referred to as the 'Advocates' and 'Royal' versions.¹ *Sir Gowther* is conspicuous for that surface crankiness and drastic speed which are often found in medieval English verse romances and which readily provoke a modern reader's suspicion that no very challenging contact with medieval society is being offered.

Gowther is the name of the son born to a hitherto childless duchess after she is first threatened with repudiation by her husband and then apparently impregnated by a devil out in an orchard. This son grows up pursuing a life of reckless helter-skelter sadism. However, when an elderly earl of the region alleges that such tyranny proves he cannot be of human stock, Gowther coerces his mother to admit the devilish identity of his father. He recoils from this revelation into a course of abject penitence. Under the pope's instruction he embraces complete voluntary silence and undertakes a startling regime of self-humiliation, accepting food only from the mouths of dogs. Gowther's spiritual rehabilitation is subsequently consolidated through the agency of an emperor's mute daughter, whom he delivers from the prospect of forced marriage to a Sultan by thrice fighting the Sultan's forces, in successive suits of armour miraculously supplied in response to prayer. Although the daughter falls from her tower when she sees Gowther wounded on her behalf, she arises after three days of 'death' and escapes also from her own mute condition to proclaim news of his divine forgiveness. Gowther marries her and they inherit the empire.

Sir Gowther has seemed in the past too slight and eccentric, too brusque and melodramatic to attract much serious notice apart from

classificatory investigation of its folktale affiliations and bureaucratic inquiry into its generic status.² What modicum of attention it has otherwise gained has arisen because it draws upon the discourse of demonology on the one hand and the discourse of penitence on the other. The narrative's powerful penitential thrust has been illuminated in particular by the work of Margaret Bradstock and Andrea Hopkins.³ Bradstock's argument that, 'apprehended at a symbolic level', the text's subject matter 'ceases to be improbable' because it projects a process of spiritual regeneration, is commended by Hopkins as 'the kind of reading [...] essential for a proper understanding of the poem'.⁴ Such a symbolic reading covers, for Bradstock, even the devil's paternity. Gowther 'is the son of a devil and therefore inherently evil. This is symbolic of the original sin.'⁵ For Hopkins, while Gowther is partly 'Everyman, who has inherited Original Sin', the devil's paternity is also emphatically literal: it causes Gowther to pursue a campaign of mass violence against the church and anyone in orders, thereby 'performing a specific task at the orders of his father, the Devil'.⁶

It is curious that willingness to countenance symbolic meanings in the religious domain has not been complemented by much willingness to consider them in the social domain. In fact, the 'symbolic' value of the fiend's paternity as interpreted by Bradstock and Hopkins has actually been predicated on a readiness to simplify the fiend's role in the narrative, diminishing equivocations which (it will here be argued) make that role socially significant, at least in one of the two surviving manuscript versions. While the present essay is by no means hostile to religious interpretation – and will in fact propose some elaboration of it – a primary concern in my discussion will be to focus sociological implications in *Sir Gowther*. Here is a narrative that emphatically addresses what Stephen Knight considers to be endemic in the romances – a 'range of threats' to the 'tenure of power' by a dominant social group, which romance narrative aims to 'resolve' by 'employing the values' that stem from that group's viewpoint 'the most credible'.⁷

The peculiarity of *Sir Gowther* is that it focuses key anxieties of society's dominant group at such a pitch as to project a kind of worst-case threat to dynastic stability.⁸ The questions that loom dramatically in this narrative concern the state of society as well as the state of the soul. An Everyman-orientated reading unwarrantably reduces the 'knightly' dimension to lesser significance. The ideological scope of the narrative is demeaned if that dimension is only held to 'subserve religious concerns' and to 'provide a metaphorical statement of them'.⁹ A more positive way of responding to sociological implications in *Sir*

Gowther is offered by Margaret Robson when she reminds us of the common medieval assumption 'that a male child takes its nature from his father and that an ignoble son means an ignoble father'.¹⁰ Robson focuses productively on fears, anxieties and desires in the narrative. Yet her psychoanalytical method situates these primarily as individual needs and anxieties. The romance clamours, I think, for analysis that highlights the text's articulation of deep-seated anxieties in medieval society about breeding and dynasty. *Sir Gowther* speaks trenchantly of the 'twin demons', or spectres, haunting such society: failure of heredity and arrogance.

The culture's obsession with purity and continuity of bloodline and with the social arrogance implicated in that are familiar to us, for example from their presence in the *Griselda* story. Elevated by marriage to noble rank, *Griselda* has a daughter. The sex of the child is reckoned disappointing, but the proof of *Griselda*'s fertility is a cause for hope – the prize of a male heir may follow. When she later bears a son, however, her husband voices the sort of plausible sarcasm that might be expected from scandalised 'gentil' society at the prospect of blood of ignoble stock inheriting the marquise.¹¹ It is worth recalling that voices were raised about such issues in actuality. A case in point would be Richard II's advancement of Michael de la Pole in 1385 from relatively humble origins to an earldom, provoking incredulous scorn.¹² As for the abiding concern about the precariousness of male succession, one might note the historian's calculation that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England, 'about one quarter of the peerage families died out in the male line about every twenty-five years and direct male succession over three or more generations was very much the exception'.¹³

To interpose these considerations into a reading of *Gowther* is to engage willy-nilly in controversy about which is the 'best' version of the romance. The penitential readings already referred to take up a position in the editorial 'turf war' which this romance provokes, because penitential readings thrive best on the version in the Advocates manuscript. The recent ascendancy of that version has meant a decline in the repute of the rival Royal version. The variations are not great, but they nevertheless produce an overall difference that is greater than the sum of the particular divergences. Henry Vandelinde is right to assert that there are 'two *Sir Gowther* poems' and that 'each has a specific agenda'.¹⁴ While it is true that the Advocates version develops the romance's latent religious configuration more effectively, it is equally true, I think, that the Royal manuscript dwells more effectively on the story's

latent social meaning. What follows concentrates attention on the Royal text, as edited by Rumble in his anthology.¹⁵ It is not a matter of asserting Royal's priority but rather of interpreting its distinctive thrust (though each rendering has had its devotees).¹⁶ The focus will especially be on the early part of the romance, and subsequently on the significance of Gowther's abasement among dogs.

Sir Gowther begins with warnings about the power of the devil. It then introduces a society wedding between a Duke and a bride who seem to have stereotypical credentials for producing noble heirs; she fair of flesh (33) and he, as he ostentatiously demonstrates at a wedding feast tournament, well able to crack the shields of doughty men (47–8). But the union remains childless for seven years. The narrative voice puts this even-handedly: 'He gat no childe, ne none she bere' (53), but the Duke proceeds to place the onus solely on his wife. He issues a simple ultimatum: the marriage will be dissolved unless she bears offspring 'That myght my londes weld and were!' (59).

The Duke in his untroubled arrogance assumes, first, that fertility is a female responsibility; and second, that effective procreation means strong male issue, to govern and police 'his' lands. The second assumption is routine in romances. The first was also a prejudice widely held in medieval culture despite the availability of a more even-handed medical opinion that sterility might inhere in either sex.¹⁷ *Octavian* is an instructive example of one romance that sustains the more enlightened opinion, since in that instance the seven-year childless marriage of an emperor and wife is perceived (by both of them) in terms of mutual responsibility, a matter of 'their' inability to 'get' a child 'between' them.¹⁸ So in *Sir Gowther*, while the Duke's aggressive masculine egotism is by no means alien to the medieval context, that should not blind us to the fact that it registers nevertheless as egotism. Emperor Octavian, by contrast, stifles and hides his patriarchal misery, which his wife only draws out of him with difficulty.

The Duke's ultimatum prompts the duchess to pray desperately for a child by whatever means ('In what maner she ne rought', 66). The result is her sexual encounter in an orchard with an incubus-fiend bearing her husband's appearance, who informs her that he has impregnated her with a child who will be 'wild' in wielding his weapon (76–8).

The narrative teasingly problematises her perception of this drama, because the identity of the male figure she encounters in the orchard is equivocally unfolded. He is initially perceived as 'a man in a riche aray' (68): he is therefore at first sight an unidentifiable newcomer, but one

wealthily dressed (so by implication not a social ‘nobody’, not a churl on the loose). Since we are then told that the man ‘bisowght’ her ‘of love’ (69) there is the momentary impression of a courtly suitor’s importuning. Immediately it is added that he appears in the ‘liknesse of here lord’ (70). Whether the duchess experiences him *as* her husband or as someone else pretending to be her husband remains crucially uncertain. That ambiguity confers an option of legitimacy upon the ensuing sex-act, whereby beneath a chestnut tree ‘His will with hire he wrought’ (71–2). Yet the imposition of ‘will’ is redolent of rape, and that is the retrospect we contemplate when the figure brusquely gets up and stands before her announcing that he has fathered a wild progeny on her. At this the duchess, whose reaction during the episode has been unknown but perhaps implicitly compliant, blesses herself – registering her alarm thereby – and runs off indoors.¹⁹

At some level the incubus fiend must be taken literally. The opening lines of *Sir Gowther* in the Royal version insist on the fiend’s power to assume the guise of husbands for sex with the men’s wives. Corinne Saunders has reminded us of the ‘clerical tradition of the incubus as a real and evil threat’, whose role it is a mistake to blur by resorting to explanations involving fantasy or the subconscious.²⁰ Yet a more capacious view is surely possible, allowing the material devil a resonant function in the externalisation of repressed thoughts. Such a view is voiced by Dyan Elliott with regard to the demonic incubus: ‘In the high Middle Ages the intimate enemy (namely, erotic thoughts and their physiological consequences), unexamined and repressed internally, was ultimately externalised and began to walk abroad.’²¹

While that may sound a suspiciously modern formulation it is not really discordant with ‘clerical’ devil-lore. Clerical tradition posits a general symbiotic relation between the mental state of any human who is to be visited, and the physical appearance adopted by the devil visitant. Thus *The Cloud of Unknowing* insists ‘þat euermore whan þe deuil takþ any bodi, he figureþ in som qualite of his body what his seruantes ben in spirit’.²² That this general hypothesis might encompass the particular case of the incubus fiend, is suggested by the way in which another treatise of this period notes that, given the eagerness of incubi to assail women, ‘þerfor it is perlyous to women þat desyryn mychil mennys companye to ben ouyr mychil solitarie withoutyn onest companye’ (my emphasis).²³

If the fiend incarnate reciprocates something in the victim’s state of mind, if the incubus may be deemed to ‘figure’ a woman’s desire for male ‘companye’ – a word carrying latent sexual connotation – then

the fiend's role in *Sir Gowther* need not be taken *only* literally. The fiend is called forth by, and in some sense projects, the near-despairing recklessness ('In what maner she ne rought', 66) of the Duchess's need for impregnation by her husband – or by someone who can seem to be him. Driving her need and therefore clearly sharing some responsibility for the 'fiendish' conception is the ruthless patriarchal pressure for ensuring dynastic succession to which she has been subjected.

The duchess's 'fiendish' impregnation is also socially suggestive in another convergent sense. In medieval culture, powerful prejudices surrounded the phenomenon of extra-marital conception. It was bad enough that the purity of the bloodline was contaminated so that 'wrong-heyring' (i.e., an illegitimate heir) ensued. 'Wrong-heyring' is what the romance of *Octavian* calls it when Octavian's mother insinuates that the twins eventually produced by her son's wife must have been fathered by some virile kitchen lad taken as a sexual partner because Octavian himself was seemingly impotent.²⁴ But such 'contamination' might have further unwanted consequences, because the product of a sexual *mésalliance* might predictably be a wild or *vileyn* offspring, unsusceptible to courtly upbringing.

Put another way – and this is the perspective most often found – where the offspring fails to conform to elite social expectations, medieval society is prepared to allege contamination in the succession. This is familiar in examples such as *Ywain and Gawain*, where Ywain's failure to keep his word to return to his new wife by the promised time provokes the rebuke of her emissary, that he is a false traitor and 'an unkind cumlyng'.²⁵ This expression is usually thought by editors to gesture towards Ywain's status as a 'newcomer' or 'outsider' in his wife's domain: but more insidious connotations of *cumlyng* are present.²⁶ In this calculated rebuke, his parentage is being queried by the imputation that he is not a scion of noble stock, but rather (in the transferred sense of *cumlyng*) an 'adopted child', or 'stray', moreover an *unkind* or 'unnatural' one. A classic exemplification of the underlying conviction here, that debased behaviour points to debased pedigree, appears in a monitory story in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. A son of the Queen of Naples secretly conceived in adultery inherits the kingdom after her husband's death, but he turns out arrogant, extortionate, a rapist, and violent, with the result that he ruins the country. A hermit discerns the lesson, that this king is 'not trewe heyr' and therefore not of a character able to bring peace to the realm.²⁷

It is in such a context that I suggest we consider how *Sir Gowther* raises the question of the potential evil of the son of a husband-

substitute whom a noblewoman has taken under pressure of an obligation to reproduce. The objection that it is a category error to start talking of the fiend as a ‘husband-substitute’ involves the corollary that the extreme penitential drive of the narrative will depend on the literalness of the fiend’s paternity in this case. Yet the Royal manuscript version does not proceed to support such a categorical reading, because it does not as a whole rehearse the fiend’s paternity of Gowther so emphatically as the Advocates text rehearses it. Indeed it has been noticed before that the devil’s fatherhood is an element much more ‘thoroughly worked out’ in the Advocates version.²⁸ Perhaps the most crucial difference in this respect is that when Gowther’s career of violence is in full spate, the Advocates text comments, ‘Erly and late, lowde and styll, / He wolde wyrke is fadur [presumably, the devil’s] wyll’,²⁹ whereas Royal has Gowther attacking ‘tho that wold not werk his [own] will’ (169–70).

In any case, at Gowther’s conception both versions immediately set out to blur the situation quite significantly. They compound the curious implications of a look-alike husband in the orchard by having the duchess rush back into her chamber and blurt out to the duke a cover-up story to the effect that by angelic prophecy she and he will now conceive a child ‘that shall your londes welde’ (84). Consequently that night, we are told (in lines whose juxtaposition in the Royal version is most fascinating) the duchess and duke went to bed and

He pleid him with that lady hende;
 She was bounde with a fende
 Til Crist wold lose hire bonde. (94–6)

The fact that the Advocates version offers a different construction strongly insinuating a ‘but’ (the Duke *pleyd* with her, but ‘all this time she was carrying the devil’s child’, as Mills translates Advocates at this point)³⁰ should not be taken to determine the more ambiguous construction of the Royal lines quoted, which leave ill-defined the connection between the Duke’s sexual activity and his wife’s being ‘bound’.

The lines offer, in fact, a classic example of a kind of ellipsis whose importance in the narrative mode of the English verse romances has been noted by Spearing. There is a shortage of ‘syntactical links’ in the narration, so ‘listeners are left to supply the connections for themselves’.³¹ In one perspective the duchess is desperately trying to cleanse or erase the ‘bad magic’ of fiendish violation by replacing the pseudo-

husband's insemination with the real husband's: she is trying to 'make' her husband be the father, to conceive a sanctified and not-wild son.³² In another perspective the duchess is insuring against the crisis of extra-marital pregnancy caused by rape, by resorting to strategic supplementary coitus. In the most interesting perspective of all, the fact that the fiend had the husband's external appearance (which critics have found baffling), and the fact that the husband as it were now 'seconds' that fiend in the act of conception, invites us to the conclusion that the Duke might just as well be the father, or, that the Duke might as well be a fiend.³³ It is as if the Duke's crude, inhuman, egotistical presumption betrays fiendishness and thence 'engenders' a monster.³⁴

Admittedly the narrative proceeds to reassert for a moment the fiend's literal paternity (stating that the very same fiend 'got' Merlin, 97–9). Yet the way in which the fiend/husband identity has been coalesced seems to sustain the option of a reading in which the romance is seen to address profound medieval anxieties about the production of heirs, and particularly of violent and ungovernable heirs, without laying these phenomena exclusively at the door of fiends. 'Exclusively' is the operative word here. The Royal redactor of the Gowther story envisages a demonic impregnation while encouraging the reader to think also about one of the 'demons' of aristocratic society, the relentless imperative of purebred dynastic continuity.

Whereas childlessness is the social nightmare in which the plot of *Sir Gowther* begins, the nightmare into which it proceeds is that of the arrogantly violent 'heir from hell'. Gowther is the horrible product of the story's joint paternity. To the extent that Gowther is not the Duke's biological son, he embodies the danger of debased behaviour resulting from what we have seen referred to in romance as 'wrong-heyring'. On the other hand, to the extent that Gowther in his violent and brutally self-willed youth is, in some secondary sense, the Duke's son, he represents the threat of wayward arrogance, rejection of God, and refusal of courtliness in a son who 'takes after' a domineering, misogynistic and self-oriented father.

The chief characteristics of Gowther's growth into bloodcurdling tyranny are three. First, as an infant he drains the life out of nine wet-nurses in succession and then, when none more are forthcoming, tears his mother's own breast. Here we need to read beyond vampire-like ghoulishness, for this is an emblem of repudiation of nurture. It echoes, as Robson notes, the Duke's own impulse to repudiate his wife (to repudiate the feminine?), but it also signifies – in the eventual

violence to the mother's breast – a self-alienation from genetic stock.³⁵ Here is the heir who will not imbibe maternal pedigree aright, who asserts 'self violently against that pedigree.'³⁶

A second characteristic of Gowther as 'the heir from hell' is that, hastily put onto solids, he grows enormously fast. On the one hand his premature size and violent power attest fiendish monstrosity: on the other, they project the danger latent at the extremity of what the culture otherwise holds desirable. Medieval culture conventionally applauds the production of inheritors of notable physique and indomitable power. The limitations of such convention do not go unobserved in romance. In the twelfth century Chrétien de Troyes astutely contrasts Calogrenant's ignorant knee-jerk knightly aggression with the civilised discipline of a 'monster' herdsman in *Yvain*.³⁷ What Gowther is becoming in the late fourteenth-century English romance is a sinister amalgam of the knee-jerk aggression of the knight with the colossal power of the monster herdsman.

His third characteristic is that once physically mature, he embarks on a reign of terror, partly victimising his mother's own retinue, but more generally victimising members of the church, even whole communities. His most sensationally barbaric act of this kind is to burn a community of nuns in their own convent – an act for which a need for penance is acutely felt later. We should notice also the disruption of specifically *feudal* protocol here. The nuns' fate follows perversely upon a scene where they have processed out to make feudal obeisance to him, kneeling and formally greeting him as liege lord (182). The demonic heir in *Sir Gowther* is an enemy of the faith, as often remarked. But such enmity is also deliberately associated with an expression of sheer wilfulness and caprice that makes him the total antithesis of all feudal responsibility and courtly *mesure*.

That Gowther comes to represent the awful prospect of the corruption of dynasty through an heir out of control is a point articulated more particularly in the Royal narrative. While both texts have the Duke knighting his son in a spirit of resignation ('His fader him myght not chastithe, / But made him knyght that tyde', lines 143–4 in Royal, paralleled at 146–7 in Advocates), only in Royal is this accompanied by an account of the father's gift of his own powerful sword – and hence in theory the transmission of its patrilineal charisma – to Gowther.

He gaf him his best swerde in honde;
 There was no knyghte in all that londe
 A dent durst him abyde. (145–7)³⁸

Although as some readers have argued there may be a hint that the parents see knighting as a last-ditch means of bringing Gowther to an adult sense of responsibility,³⁹ the paradoxical consequence in the Royal narrative is that in effect the Duke implicates himself as ‘father’ in the mayhem subsequently caused by the son with this sword. An impression that the son inherits and tyrannically magnifies the Duke’s more socially ‘acceptable’ egotism is made available in this way. That implication of enlarged egotism is confirmed by the same text’s comment that Gowther deals mercilessly with any ‘that wold not werk his will’ (169).

This reading allows Gowther’s campaign of destruction against the church to be interpreted in the light of the standard medieval doctrinal connection between faithlessness and *superbia*, pride. In moral analysis, each of these sins was coterminous with the other. For one moralist the first branch of pride was signalled by forgetfulness of God and the second branch by failure to reverence God. Conversely, the first branch of ‘mekenesse’ was to honour God.⁴⁰ For another moralist the branch of pride called ‘unobedyens’ was typified specifically by acts of hostility against the church, and against parents.⁴¹ In Gowther’s case transgression in these aspects of pride would appear to be compounded in terms of the further category of ‘unschamfulnes’ whereby the perpetrator ‘glories’ in malice, displaying no conscience, thus recalling the Psalmist’s words ‘Quid gloriaris in malicia, qui potens est in iniquitate?’ (‘Why enioyest þou in þi malyce þat art so myghty in wyckydnes?’).⁴² Gowther shows no sign of remorse or fear of God. In his faithless arrogance he is without ‘dreed’ or *timor domini*, that is without the first gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift that springs in the ground of humility and thus averts pride.⁴³

By understanding these moral inflections aright, I believe we may the better grasp the appropriateness – even the inevitability – of Gowther’s drastic self-humiliation in his voluntary debasement among dogs. This ritual self-humiliation occurs when (after the showdown with his mother and an interview with the Pope) he arrives as a penitent at the Emperor of Almayn’s palace. The analogue in *Robert of Sicily* is helpful here. King Robert is expressly a Nebuchadnezzar figure; an overweening ruler suddenly deposed by angelic *fiat* for asserting his own indomitability in express opposition to the declaration he has heard in the liturgy that God can put down the mighty.⁴⁴ The angel who displaces Robert obliges him to eat on the ground with dogs, his only food-taster now to be a hound: ‘Wher is now thi dignité?’ (168).

King Robert hits rock bottom for his arrogance, which is also as I have emphasised a denial of faith, and vice-versa. Because critics have sufficiently rehearsed Gowther's denial of faith, I think we need to restore to view the other facet of Gowther's case – the casual arrogance: the more so since this is the facet that sustains the social and dynastic questions that the romance is asking. 'Eating with dogs' invokes, of course, a biblical commonplace about faith and humility. It has nothing to do with the punishment of St Paul as Margaret Bradstock thought,⁴⁵ and everything to do with the Woman of Cana. In Matthew's account this woman interrupts Jesus, pleading on behalf of her sick daughter who is 'vexed with a devil'. Since she is a representative of a potentially unreceptive community Jesus probes her with a hostile reaction – 'It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs.' Her reply, 'True, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table' elicits his admiration: 'great is thy faith' (Matt. 15.21ff.).

The convergence of self-abasement with resolute faith in the woman's statement offers a powerful exemplification of the moralists' insistence that meekness is continuous with the honouring of God. And this explains why Gowther, arriving in his penitential journey at the Emperor of Almayn's castle, carefully makes his way up to 'the hegh bord' and then 'Thereunder he made his sete' (320–1).⁴⁶ In this self-abasing position, articulating his new-found humility and faith, Gowther joins the emperor's dogs in eating the scraps from their master's table.

The fact that Gowther specifically has excesses of arrogance to atone for is emphasised subsequently in a line somewhat reminiscent of the chastened status of Sir Gawain at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. When Gowther sets forth in miraculously provided armour for the third time to continue fighting off the heathen who have come for the emperor's daughter, we are told 'Rode he not with brag nor bost' (544).⁴⁷ Conversely, Gowther's new found humility is carefully reinforced through a series of moments of interior self-suppression. For example, when people in the emperor's court disdain him as 'Hobbe the Fool' for his dog-ridden behaviour, he mentally commits himself to Christ (359–60). In a similar gesture of self-renunciation he had responded to the arbitrary withdrawal of food-bringing dogs which for three days had sustained him during his prior journey from Rome: he thanked God 'in thowght' (301–6).

It is likely that the narrative emphasises its concern with arrogance in at least one further way, that is, iconographically. The fall of the

mute princess from her tower on seeing her champion Gowther wounded in combat with the Saracens, leaves her apparently 'dead' for three days (or for two days in the case of the Advocates version). She returns to life able to speak and to proclaim God's forgiveness of Gowther.⁴⁸ Now, falling was the commonplace sign of divine punishment for individual arrogance. Iconographically, from early in the Middle Ages, pride was frequently pictured as a man thrown from a horse.⁴⁹ More notably a fall from a tower became precisely the emblem of divine retribution for arrogant faithlessness in the later Middle Ages. In biblical iconography, the favourite illustration for the second book of Kings (Vulgate IV Kings) showed Ahaziah falling from a tower – a fate he earned by turning aside from Jehovah and consulting false gods as recounted at the start of the book.⁵⁰ In the vice and virtue designs for *Somme le roi* manuscripts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the same image was adopted.⁵¹ In the *Somme* miniatures he is juxtaposed with a counterpart in the New Testament, the egotistical hypocrite, and contrasted with an antitype in another compartment, the penitent sinner. Of course, any allusion to Ahaziah in *Sir Gowther* would have to be regarded as oblique. The princess herself does not strike us as tainted with arrogance – it is more the case that she is enacting on Gowther's part, as if sacrificially, the paradigm of the 'humbling of the mighty' which now seals his own moral rebirth and re-socialisation.⁵²

A final twist to the track we have been following is that the regenerate Gowther does not reclaim his ducal inheritance. On the contrary he hands over that inheritance to the old earl who first brought him to his senses; and he provides also for a marriage between this earl and his mother. However apt it might have been for Gowther to be reinstated as Duke, reasons both pragmatic and delicate seem to hold against it. The pragmatic is that his liaison with the Emperor's daughter, sure enough, will lead towards a grander dynasty. The more delicate reason is that, his human 'father' having died (implicitly traumatised?) during the son's career of ungovernable destruction, Gowther needs to restore, not claim, the paternal position, and at the same time offer his mother a second chance to participate in a normalised dynastic arrangement.⁵³

That is somewhat speculative. I hope that what has been more certainly demonstrated is that although the Royal version by no means eliminates the penitential and spiritual potential of the story – the moments when the abject Gowther hears bystanders affirm that he is 'a man' (327) and when he hears the Pope finally declare him to have 'bycome Godes child' (625) articulate a trajectory of profound recovery

for one who had been shocked with the information that he ‘was gotten with a fende’ (262) – this is also a narrative that finds fresh ways of addressing some of the dominant class’s deepest anxieties about heredity. What were the hidden costs of harping on the provision of *gentil* heirs? If one’s heir proved to be the ‘heir from hell’, what did that imply about his genesis? Who or what is to blame for the presence of self-willed and brutal youths in positions of power – fathers? mothers? the devil? And how does the devil’s input work?

In my view the exploration of these issues in the Royal version of *Sir Gowther* is more complex and more interesting than sometimes thought. There has been too much critical wrangling about whether it is a ‘knightly’ or ‘hagiographical’ romance. The whole point is that it is both at once. Conceivably it is so in specific historical terms. Given the decisive agency of the Pope in the text, and the horror of a dukedom ravaged for a while by tyranny, it is possibly a narrative that would fit the political circumstances of England at the end of the fourteenth century. Like the Charlemagne romances, it could be said to promote papal authority (damaged at the time by the schism) and to warn against tyrannical lordship (a phenomenon, to be sure, of the last decade of the century).⁵⁴

However, that type of contextual reconstruction is bedevilled by the vagaries of dating. What is more of a constant in the later Middle Ages, and what arguably most needs to be restored to view not only in discussion of *Sir Gowther* but in discussions of many romance narratives, is the work that such romances do on behalf of the ideology of dynasty: their presentation and resolution of the pressures and anxieties and ‘demons’ besetting a dynastic society.

Notes

- I British Library, MS Royal 17. B. 43 contains *Mandeville’s Travels*, then *Gowther*, followed by *Revelation in Patrick’s Purgatory* and *Tundale’s Vision of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven*. It is evidently a compilation concentrating on the eschatological and the exotic. The Royal text of *Gowther* is available in *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble (Detroit, 1965), pp. 178–204 (supplying some ‘omissions’ from the Advocates version). The version in National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates’ 19. 3. 1, is most conveniently available either in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London, 1973), pp. 148–68 (where it is supplemented with the opening fourteen lines of the Royal version), or in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury

- (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995); see also *Sir Gowther: Eine englische Romanze aus dem XV Jahrhundert*, ed. Karl Breul (Oppeln, 1886).
- 2 Shirley Marchalonis, 'Sir Gowther: the process of a romance', *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1971-72), 14-29; E. M. Bradstock, 'Sir Gowther: secular hagiography or hagiographical romance or neither?', *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 59 (1983), 26-47.
 - 3 Margaret Bradstock, 'The penitential pattern in *Sir Gowther*', *Parergon*, 20 (1978), 3-10; Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 144-78.
 - 4 Bradstock, 'Penitential pattern', p. 9; Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, pp. 145-6.
 - 5 Bradstock, 'Penitential pattern', p. 3.
 - 6 Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, p. 152.
 - 7 Stephen Knight, 'The social function of the Middle English romances', in David Aers (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 99-122 (p. 101).
 - 8 While the designation of a 'dominant social group' is clearly a simplification, there can be no doubt that the issues concerning lineage that are the focus of the present essay were an abiding preoccupation among those who exercised power through substantial family ownership of land in medieval England, from the gentry to the peasantry.
 - 9 Bradstock, 'Penitential pattern', p. 6.
 - 10 Margaret Robson, 'Animal magic: moral regeneration in *Sir Gowther*', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 22 (1992), 140-53 (p. 144).
 - 11 *Clerk's Tale* V. 462-8, 631-3, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al. (Boston, 1987), from which all further Chaucer quotations are taken.
 - 12 Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, 1997), pp. 117-18; Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1987), pp. 48-9 (but see p. 52 for factors other than 'cheapening' of titles in such instances). The theory of the 'heritability of nobility' is insidiously set forth in the influential *De regimine principum* (c. 1277-79) of Aegidius Romanus, as lucidly explained by Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 111-12.
 - 13 S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 198.
 - 14 Henry Vandelinde, 'Sir Gowther: saintly knight and knightly saint', *Neophilologus*, 80 (1996), 139-47 (pp. 139-40). Vandelinde's elaboration of the hypothesis lacks nuance. On the problems posed by multiple versions of the romances, see A. S. G. Edwards, 'Middle English romance: the limits of editing, the limits of criticism', in Tim W. Machan (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretations* (Binghamton, 1991), pp. 91-104.
 - 15 *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Rumble, pp. 178-204.
 - 16 The Royal version once ranked the higher in estimation, and was thought to represent an 'original' of greater courtly quality; see Marchalonis, 'Process of a romance', p. 27. More recently the Advocates version has

- been acclaimed, Royal being relegated as ‘a corrupt and inferior manuscript tradition’ on the grounds that it ‘weakens’ religious themes found in Advocates that are allegedly ‘close to the intentions of *Sir Gowther’s* author’, Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, p. 225. This judgement, and my own, make it quite paradoxical that it is in the Royal copy, rather than the Advocates copy, that the scribe was moved to label the story as if it were a saint’s life: ‘Explicit Vita Sancti’.
- 17 Opinions are clarified in Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 228–31 and 249–53. Law would tend to back up the Duke’s threat in *Gowther*, in the sense that ‘as a practical matter, a man might find a way to replace a wife, if the couple were childless, but not vice-versa’ (Cadden, p. 253).
 - 18 ‘Chylde myght they gete noon, / That tyme betwene them twoo, / That aftur hym hys londys schulde welde; /.../ A sorowe to hys herte ranne / That chylde togedur they myght noon han /.../ “And we no chylde have us between” /.../ “That we togedur may have an heyre”,’ *Octavian*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills, lines 32–4, 43–4, 65, and 80.
 - 19 On the element of rape, see Corinne J. Saunders, ““Symtyme the fend””; questions of rape in *Sir Gowther*, in M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (eds), *Studies in English Language and Literature: ‘Doubt Wisely’: Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley* (London, 1996), pp. 286–303; see also Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 223–8.
 - 20 Saunders, ““Symtyme the fende””, p. 300. Hopkins also discusses incubus-lore, but her application of it is strained in one particular. She claims that the lines commenting on the marvel that fiends got women pregnant, ‘Tho kynde of men wher thei it tane / (For of homselfe had thei never nan)’ in the Advocates version (ed. Mills, lines 16–17) invoke clerical arguments that devils ‘have to steal’ men’s nature (i.e. semen) from humans ‘because they are themselves incapable of generation’; *Sinful Knights*, p. 165, also pp. 166–7. The lines do not seem capable of this technical construction. Rather, the suggestion is that immaterial fiends can only achieve human bodily form by ‘taking’ or assuming humankind through a woman: it is a parody of the doctrine of God taking human *kynde* through Mary.
 - 21 Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 29.
 - 22 A point thrice reiterated in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS o.s. 213 (London, 1944), ch. 55, pp. 102–3.
 - 23 *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla H. Barnum, vol. 1, pt 2, EETS o.s. 280 (Oxford, 1980), p. 119. Even in a case where the incubus is impelled by a more apocalyptic motive, seeking to travesty and counter the Virgin Birth by making a maiden conceive Merlin unwittingly in her sleep, care is taken to sustain a vestigial sinfulness or sensuality in the victim: she has dropped her guard through failure to bless her room (Lincoln’s Inn text

- 840–2 and Auchinleck text 837–42) preceded by drinking (only in the Lincoln's Inn text, 809–20); see the parallel texts in *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson, EETS o.s. 268 (London, 1973). This detail is not noted in the illuminating comparison between *Gowther* and *Merlin* narratives in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 219–23.
- 24 'Moche sorowe deryth mee / That Rome schall wrong-heyred bee, / In unkynde honde. /.../ For thou myght no chylde have, / Thy wyfe hath take a cokys knave': *Octavian*, ed. Mills, lines 106–8, 115–16.
- 25 *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, EETS o.s. 254 (London, 1964), line 1627.
- 26 *MED* *comeling*, n., senses 1(a), (b), and (3).
- 27 William Caxton (trans.), *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, ed. M. Y. Offord, EETS s.s. 2 (London, 1971), p. 83, deriving from ch. 45 of *Le Livre du chevalier de la Tour Landry*, written in the 1370s. Maurice Keen gives a trenchant summary of debates about virtue and breeding in *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 156–61. The type of prejudice that Dante, Chaucer and others sought to counter in this regard appears in a passage cited by Keen from Jean de Bueil: 'I shall never believe that nobles who dishonour their arms were descended from the valiant fathers whose name they bear; one must suppose that their mothers had lechers in their mind when they engendered them. Maybe indeed they were actually in bed with them'; *Le Jouvenel par Jean de Bueil*, ed. Camille Favre and Léon Lecestre, 2 vol (Paris, 1887–89), vol. II, p. 82.
- 28 Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, p. 153; see also Bradstock, 'Penitential pattern', p. 4. After the rape scene, allusions to the fiend as father occur in *Advocates* at 96, 173, 206, 228, 238, 271, and 742, but *Royal matches* these only at 99, 203, 225, and 264.
- 29 *Advocates*, ed. Mills, lines 172–3.
- 30 'He pleyd hym with that ladé hende, / And ei yode scho bownden with tho fende' (91–2), glossed by Mills on p. 150.
- 31 A. C. Spearing, 'Early medieval narrative style', in his *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 24–55 (pp. 32–3).
- 32 Critics often note the pathos of the Duchess's account. Saunders suggests that the Lady creates a romance fiction 'where prayer has occasioned a conception more divine than devilish'; *Rape and Ravishment*, p. 225.
- 33 The only critic who has explored something like this possibility is Jeffrey J. Cohen, among some Lacanian speculations in 'Gowther among the dogs: becoming inhuman c. 1400', in Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (eds), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York and London, 1997), pp. 219–44 (p. 229).
- 34 By a similar logic *Donegild* is able to argue that the 'horrible [...] feendly creature' allegedly born to *Custance* shows the mother to be 'an elf'; Chaucer, *Man of Law's Tale*, II. 751–4.
- 35 This is a more precise point than Cohen's suggestion that *Gowther* 'resists familialism', 'Gowther among the dogs', p. 225; and see Robson,

- 'Animal magic', pp. 143, 147. By contrast Jane Gilbert, with psychoanalytical sophistry, maintains that Gowther's ravenous suckling is actually a rejection of *paternity*, defying 'the paternal authority that would forbid him absolute access to the maternal body': 'Unnatural mothers and monstrous children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*', in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne *et al.* (eds), *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 329–44 (pp. 338–9).
- 36 The initial resort to a procession of wet-nurses in *Gowther* inscribes the medieval nobility's tendency to resist in practice the concerted opinion of moralists that maternal breastfeeding was always to be preferred, since it gave an infant the chance to imbibe the 'qualities' of the mother: see Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 58–60, 120–1, 201–3.
- 37 See *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain*, ed. and trans. William W. Kibler (New York, 1985), lines 269–409.
- 38 Such transmission is articulated in examples such as Marie de France's *Yonec*, in her *Lais*, ed. A. Ewert (Oxford, 1944), lines 421–36; or in *Sir Degaré*, in *Breton Lays*, ed. Rumble, lines 115–17, 623–32, 949–64. In both cases the sword explicitly embodies the power of the father. The Advocates version of *Gowther* eschews any impression of dynastic transmission because there when he is fifteen years old Gowther makes his own massive weapon – a falchion that no other man could lift (ed. Mills, lines 136–9). Hopkins alleges that the writer of the Royal version 'tends to weaken the sword motif, as if unaware of its significance' (*Sinful Knights*, p. 159) but it will be apparent that I read the variations in Royal as elements of a coherent alternative production of the story.
- 39 Bradstock, 'Sir Gowther: secular hagiography or hagiographical romance', p. 35; Marchalonis, 'Process of a romance', p. 18.
- 40 *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS o.s. 217 (London, 1942), pp. 13, 15–16, 132.
- 41 *Jacob's Well*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115 (London, 1900), p. 71. Disobedience is epitomised by an image of a man striking a bishop in one of the bas-reliefs of the vices and virtues on the walls of Amiens cathedral; Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York, 1968), p. 126 and Fig. 73.
- 42 *Jacob's Well*, ed. Brandeis, p. 77, quoting Vulgate Psalm 51:1.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 240.
- 44 In *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. W. H. French and C. B. Hale (New York, 1964), lines 29–60. Hopkins identifies Robert's sin as 'overweening pride, especially in temporal power' which 'causes the sinner to deny the power of God' (*Sinful Knights*, p. 188).
- 45 Bradstock finds Gowther's conversion 'reminiscent, in its suddenness and finality, of the conversion of St Paul'; and suggests that 'his physical afflictions provide a parallel with the punishment of St Paul: "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9).' ('Penitential

- pattern', pp. 4–5).
- 46 The line is matched in *Advocates*, but the enforcing echoes of it in Royal lines 437 and 499 disappear in *Advocates*.
- 47 Compare Gawain, vowing to remind himself of the frailty of the flesh 'When I ride in renoun': *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 2434–5, in *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (London, 1978).
- 48 It is an interesting question whether in its focus on muteness and on the mouth, *Sir Gowther* engages in some way with hypotheses about 'possession' by devils. In Luke 11: 14 'the dumb spoke' after a devil was cast out. The emperor's mute daughter may herself be imagined as possessed prior to her fall. Devils are expelled by Jesus through the mouth from two men whom they are possessing, and made to enter the 'Gadarene swine' through the mouth, in the illustration to Matt. 9: 28–33 in the fourteenth-century *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, London, British Library, MS Additional 47682, fol. 24r. Possibly Gowther's self-imposed muteness betokens a similar recognition of 'possession'.
- 49 Mâle, *Gothic Image*, trans. Nussey, pp. 100, 104. Joanne Norman notes the variant whereby Superbia falls from her position of power on a throne: *Metamorphoses of an Allegory: The Iconography of the Psychomachia in Medieval Art* (New York, 1988), p. 81.
- 50 Ahaziah 'scorned the living and true God and instead consulted the god of Ekron': *Fasciculus morum*, ed. S. Wenzel (University Park, PA, 1989), p. 581. Statistics on the widespread dispersal of this image of Ahaziah's (or 'Ochozias's') fall are given in Robert Branner, 'The "Soissons Bible" paintshop in thirteenth-century Paris', *Speculum*, 44 (1969), 13–34 (p. 26), and in his *Manuscript Painting in Paris during the Reign of Saint Louis* (Berkeley, 1977), pp. 184–5, 178–9.
- 51 For instance, see the miniature by Master Honoré, *Somme le roi*, British Library, MS Additional 54180 (French, c. 1290), fol. 97v, reproduced in Andrew Martindale, *The Rise of the Artist in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (London, 1972), p. 25.
- 52 It is a literal rendering of that 'putting down of the mighty' at which King Robert scoffs in *Robert of Sicily*, in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. French and Hale, lines 29–57. Bradstock sees an allusion not to the iconography of humility but to a miracle in the life of St Paul, who brought back to life a youth who fell from a tower while listening to his preaching ('Secular hagiography or hagiographical romance', p. 46).
- 53 It is at this point in the narrative that I would find most use for Gilbert's overall hypothesis that Gowther needs above all to defer, not so much to a 'father' as to what Lacan calls 'the Name-of-the-Father' ('Unnatural mothers and monstrous children', p. 331).
- 54 See Robert Warm, 'Identity, narrative and participation: defining a context for the Middle English Charlemagne romances', in Rosalind Field (ed.), *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 87–100.