

A, A and B: coding same-sex union in *Amis and Amiloun*

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Form

I take my title from the rhyme scheme of a tantalising but little studied Middle English romance, *Amis and Amiloun*.¹ The poem is composed in twelve-line stanzas, rhymed AAB AAB CCB DDB, with a metrical scheme of four, four and three stresses corresponding to the rhyme. This is a variant of the well-known ‘tail-rhyme’ stanza found in some Middle English lyrics and in over twenty Middle English romances. Six of these tail-rhyme romances appear for the first time in the famous Auchinleck manuscript (written about 1330), which contains a total of eighteen romances and provides the earliest witness of the Middle English *Amis*.² There is no solid reason to believe that the poem antedates the manuscript, and the historicisation provided here argues for a composition date approximately contemporaneous with that of production of the manuscript.³

Though the rhyme scheme of our romance is thus by no means unique, in this setting it is distinctively linked with content and meaning. The triplet rhyme scheme in *Amis* makes a theme statement: same, same, and different, two of one thing and one of another. A similar usage appears in philosophical discourse, where different category is denoted by the letters A and B.⁴ The story does indeed engage important philosophical issues in a fairly schematic manner – especially intentionality and sin – though space limits prevent my demonstrating this here. On the narrative level, the issues are framed in terms of same-sex and other-sex relations: friendship, courtship, marriage. I propose, then, that AAB represents the three protagonists: two men and the woman whom one of them marries.

Not coincidentally, the names of these three characters begin with

those initials: Amys, Amylion, and Belesaunt. These initials anchor the story in a sex-linked A and B scheme in virtually all its versions. The oldest extant text is a short Latin verse narrative in the form of an epistle by Ralph Tortaire (Rodolfus Tortarius, Raoul de la Torte), a scholar-poet and monk at the Abbey of Fleury.⁵ This text has Amelius, Amicus and Beliardis as the main characters; it extends the AB scheme to the jealous courtier, Ardradus, and to the girl's mother, Queen Berta. The next surviving version, a twelfth-century anonymous Latin prose text, has Amelius, Amicus, and Belixenda as the main figures, with the villainous count Ardericus.⁶ The late twelfth-century *chanson de geste*, in monorhymed laisses, has Ami, Amile and Belissant; the evil courtier is (H)ardré.⁷ The Anglo-Norman version, in couplets, has Amys and Amillyoun, and the latter's faithful young kinsman is called Amorant (though his real name is Uwein), as in the Auchinleck text of the English version (but not in Douce). The spying seneschal is anonymous, and the girl has both a real name and a nickname, neither of which begins with B.⁸ This exception in a sense 'proves the rule', showing that any author, redactor or scribe could have changed the names, but nearly all chose to retain the alphabetical scheme.

In my view, the AAB rhyme scheme of the Middle English poem operates on both a semantic and a semiotic axis. Semantically it designates the names of the three main characters; semiotically it represents the relationship among those characters: two men paired (AA) but one of them also linked with the woman (AB).⁹ Given the meticulous attention to formal structure that characterises much medieval poetry, such care for a meaning-laden rhyme scheme need not surprise us. Teodolinda Barolini offers a meditation on the meaning of Dante's *terza rima*, a verse form invented for the *Commedia* only a few years before the production of the Auchinleck manuscript. She relates the rhyme scheme to Dante's 'poetics of the new'; it

mimics the voyage of life by providing both unceasing forward motion and recurrent backward glances. If we consider *aba/bcb/cdc*, we see that in each tercet ... the rhyme that was 'new' in the previous tercet becomes 'old'... This process ... imitates the genealogical flow of human history, in which the creation of each new identity requires the grafting of alterity onto a previous identity ... [a] combining of past and future, old and new, motion progressive and regressive.¹⁰

To generalise: in some medieval poetry, rhyme is a formal aspect of

rhetoric and meaning, with a presence at once visual and aural; thus it can serve as a point of entry to the social dimensions of a poem. Having begun with form, I proceed to genre and history, and their importance for our text.

Genre

Although both eponymous heroes of the romance marry, it is clear that they form the 'real' couple. Theirs is the completely voluntary, intensely committed life partnership which neither of the heterosexual marital unions can match and which forms the centre of narrative, moral, and psychological interest. In this sense the two heroes constitute what John Boswell designated a 'same-sex union', and to the extent that our version of the romance is loosely framed as hagiography it resembles nothing so much as the double male legends Boswell cites as early instances of the literary representation of same-sex union.¹¹ Indeed, it may well be that the generic ambiguity of this work – hagiographical romance or secular legend? – exists precisely to remind the audience of archetypal Christian precedents for same-sex union as fictional motif and social fact.

At this point, a brief plot summary of the Middle English poem is required to facilitate the reader's tracking my argument. Two adolescent nobles, not related but identical in appearance, swear a brotherhood covenant and become officials at a ducal court. One of them, Amiloun, leaves court to marry; he has identical gold cups made for himself and Amis. Meanwhile, at court, the duke's daughter, Belisant, aggressively seduces Amis, and an evil steward offers Amis his friendship; rejected, the steward accuses the young man of fornicating with Belisant. Amis claims innocence; then, forced to duel with the steward, knows he cannot win because he has lied. Amiloun – legitimately able to claim innocence of the sexual offence – therefore poses as Amis, wins the duel, but is punished with leprosy for the imposture. Amiloun's wife, revolted by his disease, chases him from home. Accompanied by a faithful young kinsman, Amiloun comes to the castle of the now happily married Amis and Belisant, and is taken in. An angelic vision reveals that the blood of Amis's children will cure his friend. Amis kills his children and Amiloun is cured; the children revive miraculously; Amiloun takes vengeance on his uncharitable wife and lives happily ever after with Amis. They found an abbey, die on the same day, and are buried in the same grave.

Variants of this story appear in several genres: romance, *chanson de geste*, verse epistle, prose sketch, miracle play; some scholars have detected folkloristic motifs. In his 1937 EETS edition, Leach proposed that 'The Amis and Amiloun stories fall into two groups: the romantic and the hagiographic', and that the English version is 'fundamentally non-Christian and non-hagiographic ... [with] no conception of Amis and Amiloun as saints'. The theme is 'the testing of friendship, not the exposition of Christian character or Christian virtue'.¹² Hagiographical elements are 'late' (that is, not present in early versions of the tale) and 'extraneous' (to the story of a tested friendship). Implicit here is the conviction of impermeable genre borders, a conviction at odds not only with the text but with literary history generally, as V. Propp observed in 1928: 'Just as elements are assimilated within a tale, whole genres are also assimilated and intermingled.'¹³

The 'romance vs. hagiography' debate looms large in scholarship on the English, French, and Anglo-Norman narratives: hagiographical romance? secularised hagiography? romance with Christian overtones but not really hagiographical? This debate strikes me as a red herring, for the history of hagiographical literature shows that saints' legends are a deeply syncretic genre from the beginning, always already full of romance, folktale and mythic motifs. We may think of princesses imprisoned in a tower (SS Christine and Barbara), of dragon-killers (SS George and Margaret), of a long sea journey with the heroes fed by an eagle (SS Vitus and Modestus), of disguise (numerous cross-dressing women saints). Early Christian hagiography borrowed from even earlier Greek or Latin romance or other classical genres, as well as from late-classical Jewish martyrology; reciprocally, some later hagiography unashamedly modelled itself on secular romance.¹⁴ Likewise, romance itself is a mongrel, some of its motifs and characters taken from hagiography, others from epic or folklore. A redactor of the *South English Legendary* makes it clear that romance was the popular literary-cultural matrix in which and against which the hagiographer often wrote:

Men wilneth uche to hure telle. of bataille of kyng
 And of knightes that hardy were. that muchel is lesynge
 Wo so wilneth muche to hure. tales of suche thinge
 Hardi batailles he may hure. here that nis no lesinge
 Of apostles & martirs. that hardy knightes were
 That studevast were in bataille. & ne fleide nocht for fere.¹⁵

Slippage of genre categories should therefore be understood as a natural

condition of the saint's life; we might even consider the fictional (as opposed to genuinely biographical) legend a subcategory of what Northrop Frye called 'the master-genre', romance.¹⁶ There can be no doubt of the existence of romance motifs in *Amis and Amiloun*; indeed, the poem could be seen as an anti-*Tristan*. In both stories, a noble girl and her mother conspire, on behalf of the hero, to subvert the father's decision about her marriage. In both, a sword separates a bedded, but not wedded, couple. In both, an ordeal is won by a technical 'truth' accomplished by disguise; in both, this deception averts the burning alive of the noble girl. (In *Tristan*, of course, the impostor-hero is not punished; in the English poem he is.) Lastly, both romances concern a triangle of two men and the woman married to one of them, although *Amis* completely revises the dynamic among the three. Yet along with these and other romance themes and motifs, hagiography is also present in our tale.

It is thus at the foundational level of genre that our text begins its subversion of rigid categories and 'norms'. It is not the first to do so, for even the earliest version, that of Ralph of Fleury – categorised by Leach in the romantic, non-hagiographic group – borrows hagiographical motifs: crucifixion is threatened as punishment, miracles of healing and resurrection occur, and the heroes share a grave. And little wonder, for Ralph himself was a hagiographer, having composed lives of Saints Maur and Benedict. Fleury itself was proud custodian of the relics of Benedict, founder of the wealthy and influential Benedictine order. It is fair to infer then, that hagiographical consciousness ran deep here, and could tinge almost any literary production of the place. Moreover, we cannot know in what form Ralph encountered the story. It could have been a lost *chanson de geste*, as Francis Bar suggests.¹⁷ But a *chanson de geste* itself might be a militarised version of a paired-saints' life (think of Roland and Oliver); or reciprocally, a paired-saints' life could be an ecclesiasticised version of an epic, or of a folktale; a folktale could be a simplified version of a *chanson de geste* or of a paired-saints' life, and so on.

Despite generic ambiguity, though, the narrative itself generates no category crisis; there is no gender slippage as there might be in a tale of cross-dressing.¹⁸ The paired protagonists are fully masculine physically and socially. They are not effeminate; they marry women and one of them reproduces; they are militarily brave and bold; they inherit property, exert lordship and impose moral and legal judgement; their friendship is at no point portrayed explicitly as a sexual one. Nevertheless, the social reality of homoerotic relations, especially in clerical

and courtly milieux, has been amply documented.¹⁹ Is there any textual reason to think of the homosocial bond of Amis and Amiloun as also homoerotic?

The confrontation between Amis and the steward suggests this interpretation. This scene just precedes, and dramatically parallels, Belisant's successful seduction attempt, so a parallel erotic motive is already hinted at structurally. This parallel is underscored by verbal echoes, especially in the demand for a mutual plighting of troth made by both the aggressive steward and the aggressive girl. The dynamic of the steward's exchange with Amis heightens the erotic atmosphere. When the steward asks Amis to be his special friend, his request is framed as competition with the absent Amiloun: 'Y schal þe be a better frende/ þan euer zete was he' (lines 359–60). The steward urges Amis to 'swere ous boþe properhed/ & plizt we our trewþes to' (362–3) in a lifelong affective bond, aiming to replace Amiloun in Amis's affections. Amis's rejection cites the exclusivity of his bond with Amiloun: he will 'Chaunge him for no newe' (384) – just as Belisant, a few stanzas later, asks Amis to 'chaunge me for no newe' (584). This competition and exclusivity suggest a more than social bond, for surely if the issue were only friendship, a person has room in his life for more than one friend. Friendship is not necessarily exclusive, but an ongoing erotic relationship usually is. Indeed, Amis appears to make this point himself, saying,

'Gete me frendes whare y may,
Y no schal neuer bi nyzt no day
Chaunge him for no newe.' (382–4)

Here, Amis acknowledges that while there may be other friends for him in general, this particular proposal is beyond simple friendship. As well, the 'night or day' phrase may be more than convenient rhyme: it may mark out one difference between friendship, a daytime relationship, and a homoerotic bond which includes bedding down together. After this firm rejection, the steward goes nearly insane with wrath (386). He threatens lifelong enmity, adding, in effect, 'You'll be sorry!' ('þou schalt abigge þis nay', line 390). Again, the emotional intensity suggests more at stake than a mere tactical alliance; the steward responds like the proverbial scorned woman. I do not want to imply that he is effeminate, only that the emotional pitch is so high that eroticism seems to be at issue.

Later, the steward spies on Belisant's seduction of Amis, lurking in the room next door specifically in order to witness the couple's

lovmaking through a little hole in the wall – a detail unique to the English version. Much is made of sight here: ‘He seize hem bope ... he seyze hem bope wiþ sizt’ (773–5). What is odd about this voyeuristic scene is that the steward already knows that the pair are involved because the indiscreet and aggressive Belisant ogles Amis at dinner (694–705). Rather than warning the duke, or scolding the girl, the steward simmers, awaiting the opportunity to betray the young couple (705–8). Perhaps he requires ocular evidence of their affair before denouncing them; perhaps it is part of his degenerate character that he likes to watch, for he runs after them in order to do so: ‘For to aspie hem bope þat tide, / After swiþe he ran’ (731–2). And, having seen, he is once again insanely wrathful (778–9).

It can be argued, and rightly, that the steward’s job is to protect his overlord’s interests and property, including the reputation of the duke’s daughter. But the emotional intensity once more suggests another level of motivation: jealousy that the girl has landed Amis, resentment that he himself has been rejected from this very scenario and is now reduced to the undignified position of spying – addressing a different little hole than what he might have hoped.

Are there other ‘little holes’ in the story – openings where a queer reading might make sense? Here are two more. Amoraunt, now a strong fifteen-year old, takes great care of his lord Amylion and ‘at his rigge he dizt him zare’ (1832): on his (Amoraunt’s) back he (Amoraunt) placed or carried him (Amiloun) readily. This is clearly the narrative meaning required, for the boy does carry his uncle. Still, as a submerged but grammatically correct sexual pun, the phrase could read: at his (Amiloun’s) back he (Amoraunt) did/serviced him (Amiloun).²⁰ Later, when the two arrive before Amis’s gate, Amis’s officers note the extraordinary beauty of Amoraunt, the ‘naked swain’ (1972). This nakedness shows the boy’s utter poverty, but given his attractiveness it also adds a hint of erotic titillation to the knight’s offer to introduce Amoraunt to Amis’s court and ensure his success there.

My point, then, is that at certain moments the text permits an erotic reading of the male–male relationships in the story. It is, moreover, precisely the hagiographic background that encourages such a reading, specifically the thousand-year old tradition of lives of paired male saints.

Paired saints of both sexes were not uncommon in hagiographical literature, quite apart from the often coupled apostles Philip and Bartholomew, Simon and Jude, Peter and Paul. According to Boswell, the first documented male pair were the third-century Armenians

Polyeuct and Nearchos; next, the popular Serge and Bacchus, Roman soldiers. Boswell's list of other male pairs includes Marcellus and Apuleius, Cyprian and Justinus, Cosmas and Damian, Dionysius and Eleutherius;²¹ Butler²² adds Abdon and Sennen, Cyril and Methodius, Crispin and Crispinian, Processus and Martinian, Marcus and Marcellian, while the *Golden Legend* provides another (and different) fourteen male–male pairs.

Some of these *vitae* have motifs similar to those in the Amis and Amiloun tale, again illustrating the artificiality of a too-strict demarcation of genre lines. Common topoi are fidelity to a vow, miraculous healing, angelic voices, wandering, disguise and poverty, and ability to revive the dead. Though these appear in many legends paired or not, burial in the same grave (as in *Amis*) is normally limited to paired saints and is usual for them. Nearly all the paired saints in the *Golden Legend* and in Butler's *Patron Saints* are buried together, whether as friends, siblings or spouses. Occasionally they are buried together even when the two saints were neither friends nor martyred together (Gordianus and Epimachus, for example).

Like Amis and Amiloun, saints Serge and Bacchus are said by one writer to resemble each other 'in size, appearance, greatness, and youth of body and soul'.²³ Like the convoluted plot of *Amis and Amiloun*, the ordeal of Serge and Bacchus begins with denunciation by a courtier envious of the protagonists' closeness to the ruler. In the legend, as in many others, the emperor Maximian reacts with the rage typical of the persecuting tyrant. This conventional rage survives in the Middle English text in the person of the wrathful, impulsively violent duke, Belisant's father, who tries to kill the offending Amis rather than investigate the steward's charge of fornication. In the Nearchos–Polyeuct legend, Polyeuct, 'joined to Nearchos by boundless love, was prepared, he said, to subordinate everything to his absolute love for Nearchos – injury, death, or anything else, to such an extent that he would not even spare his children for the sake of Nearchos, since he counted them, too, as less important than his love for the latter'.²⁴ This sentiment – paternal love superseded by the bond of friendship – is precisely what provides the grisly dénouement of our tale.

What these parallels suggest is that the elements of same-sex paired saints' legend found in our romance may be a way of representing same-sex union in the high Middle Ages. Boswell argues – convincingly, in my view – that the early lives themselves perform exactly this coding; indeed, his argument is even more radical in claiming that the early legends did not encode (in the sense of disguise) but rather

represented social reality fairly straightforwardly. This may have been true even for the earliest author, the monastic hagiographer-poet Ralph Tortaire, and I think it is indubitably so for the Middle English redactor, especially given his social context. What might be, then, the pragmatics of this story in its English treatment?

History

Two dimensions of medieval political history emerge from my reading: one international and of relatively long duration, the other distinctively English and contemporaneous with the Auchinleck manuscript. No historicisation, on either level, has yet been attempted with this richly signifying work.

On the international level, the ecclesiastical reform movement initiated by Pope Gregory VII did not die when Gregory did in 1085, but intensified as the Catholic Church strove to increase its political power, social influence and wealth, especially *vis-à-vis* the secular state. To those ends it campaigned to purify the lives of its ministers. Homosexuality per se was not a major focus of the reform movement: simony and clerical marriage were the main targets. Nonetheless, Boswell suggests that from the mid-eleventh century, two orientations toward homosexuality and homosociality began to develop. One was the ascetic, anti-sodomy lobby (e.g., Peter Damian or Ivo of Chartres), which met with little positive response from the hierarchy; the other celebrated the positive value of homoerotic relations in poetry, letters, and treatises on spiritual friendship (e.g., Anselm of Laon, Aelred of Rievaulx, and many known and anonymous clerical poets).²⁵ A story of impassioned same-sex friendship such as that narrated by Ralph Tortaire, schoolmaster and writer at the distinguished monastery of Fleury, can only have fortified the latter tendency. Perhaps this is one reason why the heavily ecclesiasticised French version of *Amis and Amiloun*, the so-called *chanson de geste*, must develop the leper-hero's marriage as extensively as it does, along with the military dimension: precisely to prevent the audience seeing it in light of pro-homosociality and its threatening erotic undercurrent. On the other hand, the English version, in effacing clerics, minimising marriage, and sanctifying the male couple, magnifies the homosocial and potentially homoerotic dimension. Clearly neither the original author nor the English redactor would have much sympathy with the draconian ruling of the late thirteenth-century law treatise *Fleta*, which recommended live

burial for those guilty of intercourse with Jews, animals or persons of the same sex.²⁶

In fact, the so-called ‘genre’ question should probably be seen as a covert political question inasmuch as the greater or lesser ecclesiastical content in a given version of our tale creates an alignment on major issues confronting the Church during just this two-century period between its earliest Latin version and its first Middle English version. As an illustration we may cite the episode in the heavily ecclesiasticised *chanson de geste* in which the leper’s aristocratic wife, the evil Lubias, tries to bribe a bishop with thirty pieces of silver to grant her a divorce; she is rebuffed. Here, the French Church asserts its virtue against seigneurial nobility and the feudal state, and against women’s treacherous, Judas-like wiles. The Church is portrayed as pro-marriage, anti-simony, and superior to lay power, hence as enacting the rulings of various ecclesiastical councils, especially the Third Lateran of 1179.²⁷

At the time of its first surviving inscription by Ralph Tortaire, the story may already have had a historical basis, perhaps the famous friendship of two homonymic Aquitainian lords: William, fifth duke of Aquitaine and William, fourth count of Angoulême.²⁸ The historical thrust of this ur-version must remain speculative, but not that of the Middle English text. In early fourteenth-century England, the question of same-sex union had a quite practical application, for no less a personage than the young king Edward II was partner in a same-sex union. This well-documented relationship was not only known throughout the country but became a major political issue of the day.²⁹ We do well to recall that the compendious Auchinleck manuscript contains – besides its romances and religious texts – a metrical chronicle of England, a list of Norman barons who supposedly fought at Hastings, a verse life of Richard I, and a stanzaic poem on the various ills England experienced during the reign of Edward II. If we read a political subtext in *Amis and Amiloun*, another crossing of genres emerges, this one with political commentary.

Parallels between our romance and the reality of Edward II and Piers Gaveston are striking. I do not propose an allegory, translatable at every point from fiction into history: for one thing, the original long predates Edward’s reign; for another, detailed allegory is not required in order to establish points of contact. I do not maintain that *Amis* or *Amiloun* ‘is’ Edward or Piers, only that distinctive features of their story have been added to a tale which might well already have been modeled on the real relationship of two noblemen. Points of contact there certainly are, and far too many to be merely coincidental. I

suggest that in this story an English writer found material suitable for indirect representation of issues of his day, and that he shaped this material to make its suitability even more apparent.

Like the two fictional heroes, the real pair were notably handsome noble youths, Edward particularly strong and athletic.³⁰ They met in 1297, when Piers was brought into Edward's retinue, having been sent out for service as was the custom amongst European nobility and as is the case in our romance. By order of Edward I the two youths were educated together, probably a reward to Piers's father for his years of service.³¹ Chroniclers write that the young men's relationship was intense, loving and exclusive; we know that Edward's attachment outlasted Piers's death by several years. Probably the relation was contractual, for Edward referred to Piers as his 'brother' in letters and documents, just as Amis and Amiloun do verbally, and the *Vita* says that the king adopted Piers as a brother. This was said to have been one reason why Edward I banished Gaveston in 1307.³² The *Vita* likens their friendship to that of David and Jonathan or Achilles and Patroclus, but even stronger; it is, like David's, a 'love ... which is said to have surpassed the love of women'.³³ What other points of contact are there?

Item: Only in the English poem are the boys taken to the ducal court by their parents to be educated there, and much is made of their being away from home so young. Piers was brought to the English court by his father in person, to be educated there.

Item: Only the English author specifies that it is between the age of twelve (when they begin courtly service) and fifteen (when they are knighted: line 163) that Amis and Amiloun pledge their personal covenant of 'trouth'. Edward and Gaveston met at about thirteen. The romance pair are knighted together; Edward and Piers were knighted within a few days of one another.

Item: The violent temper of a father and ruler is manifested in reality and in fiction: When Edward requested a large land grant for Piers in 1306, his notoriously violent father viciously assaulted him, much as the Duke assaults Amis on learning of his relationship with Belisant. In both cases, the motive may be less moral outrage at an offspring's irregular sexual relationship than anger at the alienation of territory into the hands of a person of less exalted rank. (We recall that Amis pleads his 'poverty' as a reason not to marry Belisant. Piers, though of noble background, was still a squire in England, not yet created the prince he would become when Edward, once crowned, was free to endow him generously as Earl of Cornwall and with many other lands and gifts.)

Item: The two fictional heroes are undone by the jealous inter-

vention of an envious baron, the Duke's steward. The English barons' hatred of Piers Gaveston began as early as Edward's coronation in 1307, at which the young Gascon squire played a very prominent role. It nearly erupted into civil war over the next five years and eventuated in his murder; Hamilton observes that 'baronial animosity toward him is the central feature of English domestic policies during the years 1307-13'.³⁴ Gaveston was hated and resented because he was a foreigner; because he was arrogant and flamboyant; because he monopolised the king's attention; because he was not by birth at the same level of nobility as the English peers whom he supplanted; and above all because it was felt that Edward advanced him beyond his merit, to the disadvantage of older and more experienced English barons.

Item: When Amiloun has to return to his own land to claim his inheritance, Amis escorts him a day's journey on his way; this is the youths' first separation. The detail of personal escort appears only in the English version. When Piers Gaveston was exiled in April, 1307, Edward personally escorted him to Dover. Again in 1308, when Piers was exiled to Ireland, Edward, now king, escorted him to the port of Bristol, in both instances with lavish send-offs and extravagant gifts.

Item: Like the two romance heroes, both Piers and Edward married, fought well, and governed (Gaveston in Ireland and in his own territories).

Item: The fact that Amiloun's wife swears by 'Seyn Denis of Fraunce' (1567) and is governed by traditional feudal principles marks her as French. Edward's wife was Princess Isabella of France. The oath is unique to the English version.

Item: Amiloun wins a tournament against the older, jealous steward through deceit (he poses as Amis and takes an equivocal oath of innocence). Piers Gaveston and his athletic young cohort won a tournament against a group of older, jealous barons at Wallingford in December, 1307; he was accused of deceitfully bringing onto the field many more men than were allowed.

Item: Amiloun's wife drives him from bedchamber, dining table, castle and homeland to wander with his lone faithful retainer. Isabella's invasion of England in September, 1326 drove the king from Westminster and then from London, forcing him to wander for two months in the west country and Wales until he was betrayed, captured, deposed and, the following year, killed.

Item: Amiloun's wife arranges a bigamous and adulterous marriage with another knight.³⁵ Isabella's adulterous, long-term liaison with Roger Mortimer, the rebel earl of March, was notorious by the end of 1325.

Item: When Amiloun and the faithful Amorant are living in exile, the English narrator accounts for their poverty by telling of a great dearth of grain resulting in rising prices and famine (1736 ff.). This is unique to the English version. In 1316, an unusual dearth of grain struck England, followed by rising prices and famine: 'Such a scarcity has not been seen in our time in England, nor heard of for a hundred years.' It lasted about two and a half years, ending in 1318.³⁶

Item: At Amis's castle, Amiloun is accused of having stolen the precious golden cup that he shows just before the anagnorisis. Curiously, he is not denounced as a thief but as a *traitor* (2045, 2077) – a specifically political offence – and said to be worthy a traitor's punishment: drawing (that is, being dragged by a horse around the city). This punishment was a not uncommon public spectacle in London and other cities. Piers Gaveston was accused in the baronial Ordinances of 1311 of having appropriated royal treasure and sent it abroad, to the impoverishment of the kingdom. This charge was repeated in 1312, after Gaveston's murder as a traitor, in connection with a hoard of jewels and other precious items, the so-called Newcastle inventory of royal treasures. The barons desired Edward II to denounce Gaveston as a traitor because of this alleged 'theft', but Edward refused to do so. Chaplais concludes that the charges, 'unsupported as they are by any record evidence, cannot be taken seriously'.³⁷

Item: Though we lack the ending of the Auchinleck version, other manuscripts have the two heroes buried in the same grave, like so many of the paired male saints whose legends offer a literary analogue. Piers Gaveston was beheaded, like many a saint, and after two years with the Oxford Dominicans his corpse was moved – translated, we might say – to Langley, site of his and Edward's favorite haunt, and buried there.

Writing of his own work on Dante's poetics, John Freccero remarked, 'To begin with an abstract form is to proceed in a manner that is the reverse of what one might expect of a cultural historian'. To this the best rejoinder – as Freccero knew – is Roland Barthes's epigram: 'A little formalism turns one away from History, but ... a lot brings one back to it.'³⁸ Much remains to be said about the intriguing tale of Amis and Amiloun – about its philosophical stance, its religious orientation, its rhetoric. I hope that this essay, focusing as it does on form, genre, and historical context, may suggest further avenues of research and fields of play for current critical methods.

Notes

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- 1 The romance is extant in four manuscripts, of which the earliest, the Auchinleck, is at the National Library of Scotland. This is the manuscript on which the EETS edition by MacEdward Leach is based (London, 1937; EETS o.s. 203), but since it has been damaged at the beginning and end of the poem, Leach supplements from Egerton 2862, a late fourteenth-century manuscript also known as Sutherland after an early owner, the duke of Sutherland. Leach's edition will be my citation text. The edition by Françoise Le Saux (*Amys and Amylion*, Exeter, 1993) uses Douce 326, a late fifteenth-century manuscript at the Bodleian Library. This is the fullest version, and the edition is extremely convenient for teaching. The latest text is Harleian 2386, also at the British Library; it contains only about a third of the poem. Apparently none of the four used one of the others as exemplar.

Le Saux's bibliography lists only five short critical studies of the ME poem before 1993, all of them published between 1966 and 1983; one is primarily a comparison with the Anglo-Norman version. The poem has been mentioned briefly in various books, and there are a number of articles, mainly in French, about the Anglo-Norman and French versions.

- 2 For a facsimile edition, see *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, eds Derek Pearsall and C. Cunningham (London, 1977). Conditions of production and consumption of the manuscript were first studied by Laura Hibbard Loomis, 'The Auchinleck manuscript and a possible London bookshop of 1330-1340', *PMLA*, 57 (1942), 595-627; reprinted in Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Adventures in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1962). Loomis's workshop hypothesis has been challenged by Timothy A. Shonk, 'A study of the Auchinleck manuscript: bookmen and bookmaking in the early fourteenth century', *Speculum* 60 (1985), 71-91; he argues for a less centralised system: still secular and commercial but with a dealer-seller-editor and perhaps translator farming out work to freelance scribes. The manuscript may have been used by Geoffrey Chaucer in composing his 'Tale of Sir Thopas', as Loomis argued in 'Chaucer and the Auchinleck manuscript', in P. W. Long (ed.), *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York, 1940), pp. 111-28.
- 3 The most that can be said about this is that since the later manuscripts of the poem contain material that the Auchinleck version lacks, they may derive from another (very similar) source. However, this hypothetical source may not be much earlier than what we have; it may be, as Pearsall and Cunningham suggest in the Scolar facsimile, 'the bookshop translation

- or the bookshop copy that lies behind the Auchinleck copy' (p. x). There are, of course, other ways of accounting for the different material that would save the idea of Auchinleck as the original Middle English version.
- 4 Aristotle used letters to designate propositions, qualities, and categories in various treatises. For instance, *Topica*: 'Thus if A defines a better than B defines b, and B is a definition of b, so too is A of a' (Book 7.3. 154a) or *Ethica Nichomachea*: 'Let A be a builder, B a shoemaker, C a house, D a shoe ... Let A be a house, B ten minae, C a bed. A is half of B, if the house is worth five minae ...; the bed, C, is a tenth of B ...' (Book 5. 5. 1133a and 1133b) in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1908–52), vols 1 and 9. I am indebted to D. W. Luscombe's kind assistance for these Aristotle references; also see *Analytica Priora*, *Analytica Posteriora*, and *De Sophisticis* in volume 1. Given the overwhelming authority of Aristotle, it is not surprising that the habit was well established among medieval scholars by the time Ralph Tortaire wrote the first known version of the Amis and Amiloun story (in the eleventh or twelfth century – see the following note), even though much of Aristotle's work was not translated until the thirteenth century. However, various treatises of Aristotle had been translated by Boethius in the sixth century. In original works and in commentaries on Aristotle, the convention was widespread. The eleventh-century Garlandus Compotista uses it in his *Dialectica*, ed. L. M. De Rijk (Assen, 1959), pp. 147, 148, 149, 156, 169, as did Abelard, a younger contemporary of Rodolfus, in his logical works, e.g., *Ypoteticarum*, in the *Dialectica*, ed. L. M. De Rijk (Assen, 1970), and Aquinas in commenting on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, *passim*; trans. F. R. Larcher (Albany, 1970). In lecture 28, Aquinas uses sex as an example of predication: 'Thus we may take some middle which is predicated particularly of A and of B, say "male", which is predicated particularly of animal and of man. Now if C is taken in every A, say "Every animal is male", and in no B, say "No man is male", each proposition will be false ... etc.': *Posterior Analytics*, trans. Larcher, p. 93. The thirteenth-century English logician William of Sherwood has 'Let the whole of Socrates be called "a", ... but his foot "b". Thus a is an animal, and b is an animal', *Treatise on Syncategorematic Words*, ed. Norman Kretzmann (Minneapolis, 1968), p. 60. The thirteenth-century Portuguese logician Peter of Spain uses letters for both propositions ('assertibles') and categories, e.g., 'The one running is a ... Man is a' in 'Treatise on obligations', in *Tractatus Syncategorematicum*, ed. Joseph P. Mullally (Milwaukee, 1964), p. 127. The thirteenth-century English courtier-cleric John Blund uses category-letters in his *Tractatus de Anima*, ed. D. A. Callus and R. W. Hunt (London, 1970), pp. 36–8. The usage is common in the work of Duns Scotus on the existence and unicity of God; cf. his *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Allan Wolter (London, 1962), pp. 39, 51 *et alibi*. Also see the essays and texts collected in P. Osmond Lewry (ed.), *The Rise of British Logic* (Toronto, 1983), where A and B can designate a proposition,

a place, an entity, a moment or a person. In Oxford mathematical treatises, 'letters A, B, C, etc., were used to represent ... velocities, or degrees of quality, or propositions, or distances, or instants': Edith Dudley Sylla, 'The Oxford calculators', in Norman Kretzmann *et al.* (eds), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 562.

My argument does not, of course, depend on rhyme schemes being designated with letters in the Middle Ages, only on end rhymes being perceived as same or different, men and women being perceived as same or different, and similarity and difference being designated by letters.

- 5 See *Rodolphi Tortarii Carmina*, ed. Marbury B. Ogle and Dorothy M. Schullian (Rome, 1933). A translation appears in Leach's Appendix A, and Le Saux includes a summary in her Appendix 1. Life-dates and composition dates are not known precisely, but Ralph could have been born about 1065 and would have lived to a ripe old age if he is indeed responsible for the epitaphs to Abelard attributed to him, for Abelard died in 1142. Prefatory poems about Ralph attached to the manuscript praise his lifelong ('a puero') study, impeccable life, and fine reputation. The other epistles reveal a taste for exotica and enjoyment, strong ties of affectionate friendship, and a confident, self-aware poetic sensibility.
- 6 This is summarised in Le Saux's Appendix 2.
- 7 *Ami et Amile, Chanson de Geste*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski (Paris, 1969).
- 8 *Amys e Amillyoun*, ed. Hideka Fukui, Anglo-Norman Text Society Plain Texts series 7 (London, 1990).
- 9 On the simultaneous incorporation of semantic and semiotic axes into Middle English poetry, see my *Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 154–64.
- 10 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 24–5; see also John Freccero, 'The significance of *terza rima*' in Rachel Jacoff (ed.), *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).
- 11 John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994), ch. 3. A. H. Krapp suggested that 'twin saints' are a Christian substitute for pagan twin-god cults such as that of Castor and Pollux; they are 'twin legends in hagiographic garb': 'The legend of Amicus and Amelius', *Modern Language Review*, 18 (1929), 152–61.
- 12 *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Leach, pp. ix, xxvii, xxvi.
- 13 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin, Texas, 1975), p. 100; italics in original.
- 14 A case in point for early hagiography borrowing from earlier classical literature is the story of St Faith (Foi) as a christianised /inverted version of the story of Dido and Aeneas; see my *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 40–1. Also Thomas McAlindon, 'The medieval assimilation of Greek romance', *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 3 (1985), 23–56. The fifteenth-century Augustinian John Capgrave modelled his

- Life of St Katharine* on Chaucer's *Troilus*: cf. M. A. Stouck, 'Chaucer and Capgrave's *Life of St. Katherine*', *American Benedictine Review*, 33 (1982), 276–91 and Derek Pearsall, 'John Capgrave's *Life of St Katharine* and popular romance style', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 6 (1975), 121–37. See also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "'Bet ... to ... rede ... on holy seyntes lyves ...': romance and hagiography again', in Carol M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 83–97.
- 15 *South English Legendary: Corpus Christi MS 145*, ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, 2 vols, EETS 235, 236 (London, 1956), lines 59–64.
 - 16 Hagiography certainly fits Northrop Frye's description of romance: 'The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages ... the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict.' Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 187.
 - 17 Francis Bar, 'Raoul le Tourtier et la chanson de geste d'*Ami et Amile*', in *La Chanson de geste et le mythe Carolingien. Mélanges René Louis*, 2 vols (Vézelay, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 973–86.
 - 18 See Simon Gaunt, 'Straight minds / 'Queer' wishes in Old French hagiography: *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*', in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (eds), *Premodern Sexualities* (New York, 1996); also see Allen J. Frantzen's discussion of this legend and critique of Gaunt's essay, in *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago, 1998).
 - 19 For example in Thomas Stehling (trans.), *Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship* (New York and London, 1984); Michael Goodich, *Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period* (Oxford, 1979); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980). Many social historians and queer-theory scholars emphasise the nineteenth-century invention of the category 'homosexual', but Bernadette Brooten documents the medical identity-categorisation for homosexuality (using various terms) from various cultures in much earlier periods: *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, 1996).
 - 20 *MED* includes among its meanings for 'dight' to get ready for use, and to have sexual intercourse with.
 - 21 Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, p. 154, n. 205.
 - 22 *Butler's Lives of Patron Saints*, ed. Michael Walsh (San Francisco, 1987); *Jacobus de Voragine: The Golden Legend*, trans. William G. Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton, 1993).
 - 23 Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, p. 155; the writer is Severus of Antioch, early-sixth-century. Boswell adds that 'these are all obvious generalities of

- Greek erotic writing, and it is easy to imagine that Severus simply added them as a rhetorical flourish' (p. 155, n. 210). Another approach to the resemblance motif is that it may originate in ancient cults of twin gods, which David Greenberg suggests may have practised cult homosexuality: *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago and London, 1988), pp. 243–4. The motif of the double or twin is also known in folktale: cf., among others, Gédéon Huet, 'Ami et Amile. Les origines de la légende', *Le Moyen Age*, 31 (1919), 162–86, esp. pp. 167–8.
- 24 Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, pp. 142–3.
- 25 Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 210–22 and ch. 9 documenting this 'gay subculture' (p. 243). See also Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, 1997).
- 26 Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 292.
- 27 This episode is discussed by Geneviève Pichon, 'La lèpre dans *Ami et Amile*,' in *Ami et Amile. Une Chanson de geste de l'amitié*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris, 1987). Also of interest is Lubias' subsequent provocation of an anti-clerical bourgeois revolt. For rulings of ecumenical councils of the Church, see *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. Joseph Alberigo et al. (Freiburg, 1962).
- 28 Bar, 'Raoul le Tourtier', pp. 984–5, n. 66. Bar notes that the latter William received Blaye as fief from the former. Bar is following a suggestion made by J. Koch in 1875. Ralph writes that although his tale is considered merely fictional ('fabula ficta'), it mixes truths and falsity (Epistula 2, lines 119–22, in *Carmina*, ed. Ogle and Schullian). He might mean historical truth, moral truth or both.
- 29 My main sources for Edward and Piers are Harold F. Hutchison, *Edward II: The Pliant King* (London, 1971); J. S. Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall, 1307–1312: Politics and Patronage in the Reign of Edward II* (Detroit and London, 1988); Pierre Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston, Edward II's Adoptive Brother* (Oxford, 1994); and the anonymous *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. and trans. N. Denholm-Young (London, 1957). This text breaks off in 1326 and the editor makes a good case for its authorship by one John Walwyn, a government official with lay and ecclesiastical education, who died in that year. Though the manuscript in which the *Vita* appears was held for a time at the Benedictine Abbey at Malmesbury, there is no indication that it 'was composed there, or that the author was ever a monk at Malmesbury or anywhere else' (p. xv).
- 30 Piers was not a nobody but son of an important baronial family from Gascony, an English-controlled territory; his father served Edward I for twenty years in Wales, Scotland and elsewhere; his brothers served Edward II. Contemporary chronicles attest to the handsomeness and fine physical build of both young men.
- 31 James Conway Davies, *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II* (London, 1918), p. 82.
- 32 *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. Denholm-Young, p. 28 ('quem rex adoptauerat

- in fratrem'); Davies, *Baronial Opposition*, p. 84.
- 33 *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. Denholm-Young, p. 30.
- 34 Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston*, p. 15. The reasons had little if anything to do with sexual matters; rather the emphasis was on Edward's slighting other barons in order to advance the young foreigner, and on Piers's tactless behavior and financial recklessness.
- 35 This does not occur in the French. In the Anglo-Norman, it does, but the wife believes that Amyllion is dead, while the English says nothing about such a mistake. In any case, there is disagreement as to whether her ignorance of Amiloun's cure would legally free his wife from the bond of marriage. In 1180, Pope Alexander III ruled that a spouse's leprosy did not justify divorce; the well spouse should either care for the ill one or, if separated, live chaste: Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and his Northern Heirs* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 62.
- Hutchison observes that 'one chronicler suggests that' in 1324 Edward's baronial supporters were 'actually attempting to obtain a papal annulment of the marriage' (*Edward II*, p. 129); for her part, Isabella claimed that her marriage had been broken by the presence of a third party (Hugh Despenser) occupying the king's attention; cf. *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. Denholm-Young, p. 143.
- 36 *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. Denholm-Young, p. 69. The last item in the Auchinleck manuscript, a long social complaint in verse, makes much of the great dearth of grain and the famine, as God's punishment of English lay and ecclesiastical wrongdoing. See the Scholar Press facsimile edition.
- 37 Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, p. 101.
- 38 Freccero, 'Terza rima' (above, n. 10), p. 260; Roland Barthes, 'Myth today', in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1978; originally published Paris, 1957), p. 112.