Sir Degrevant: what lovers want

Arlyn Diamond

According to *Sir Degrevant*, an early fifteenth-century romance with a lively plot and remarkable density of description, what women want is a handsome, valiant, wealthy and noble lover, triumph over fierce paternal opposition, a splendid wardrobe, and a fabulous room of their own.¹ What men want is a noble reputation, a huge deer park in which to spend their days hunting, extensive and prosperous estates, triumph over would-be oppressors, and a beautiful opinionated heiress. And, the happy ending suggests, they both ought to get what they want. In *Degrevant* marriage reconciles two enemies, incorporating into an established household and lineage new blood on the basis of merit, not just inherited rank, and validating women's right to choose a husband. Moreover, as so often in Middle English popular romances, (*Havelok* or *William of Palerne* or *The King of Tars*, for instance) the marriage between hero and heroine delineates the intersection of the personal and the social, the masculine and the feminine, intersections which will form the focus of this essay.

Degrevant is written in the sixteen-line tail-rhyme stanza often characteristic of popular romances, and, although it has no identifiable main source or close analogues, it also incorporates a number of conventional thematic and verbal formulas. The meeting of lovers in a garden, the rival suitors clashing in a splendid tournament, the feasts, the unsympathetic fathers and helpful maids, are all elements which had proven their literary appeal to a wide range of audiences for more than a century. At the same time, as W. A. Davenport points out, 'this romance is closer than many to the actual concerns of the landowning class of the time – property, fences, hunting rights, being just to one's tenants, seeking proper legal redress for wrongs, and eventually, after much harm done, compromise and reconciliation'.²

While agreeing with Davenport's desire to place the narrative in a knowable historical context, I think he defines the audience and its 'actual concerns' too narrowly. Without disputing the justice of his formulation, I would argue that the very term *landowning class*, however accurate, tends to occlude women's social and cultural activities. My reading centres on the term 'household' as a way of understanding the social imagination of the romance, and its representation of gendered lives and desires. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the term indicates both a place – the heart of a landed estate – and a social and economic institution – a powerful landholding family with its servants and retainers.³ It is the site of the reproduction of families through marriage, and of the household itself through the inheritance of goods and status, ideally from father to eldest son. It exists to satisfy the desires of the ones who head it, but in its splendid displays of possessions and extravagant hospitality it advertises their power, attracting adherents and intimidating would-be rivals.⁴ In her engrossing and thorough study of the noble household (a term which can stretch to include both the aristocracy and the wealthy gentry who shared their values), Kate Mertes claims that 'it cannot be dismissed as a mere domestic organisation, nor yet as a simple political tool of the noble classes. It functioned as an important structure in helping men and women of the later middle ages to conceive, comprehend and carry out their existence.'⁵ Thus, for poet and audience, it is easy to understand the conflict between the two men as a struggle for power between rival households. Moreover, because the household is a familial institution, it offers a possible site for the representation of female initiative and desires, particularly as they concern marriage.

In the getting and maintaining of wealth and power, a particularly demanding task in the political and economic upheavals of the fifteenth century, the making of marriages was a way of brokering alliances and providing for the orderly transfer of wealth.⁶ Among those with property, medieval marriages were as much part of familial social strategy as they were personal relationships. Although canon law required that both parties consent to a marriage, dependent children, especially daughters, were not expected to choose partners against their family's wishes.⁷ When this romance, as I hope to show, endorses the love-match between the daughter of an arrogant earl and the less well-born knight whose lands he has attacked, it links female autonomy with the widespread social fantasy that through marriage and luck one could aspire to enter the ranks of the nobility. The marriage insures the continuation of the earl's line, and the man he has despised will inherit

his father-in-law's estate, becoming his peer in wealth and status if not birth. The idea of marrying up was not a radical one in English society, which was, in Dyer's terms, 'remarkably resilient and flexible', although the great barons in practice married among themselves.⁸ However, such flexibility was never without its tensions, as the rise of the ambitious encountered the inherent conservatism of a class where rank and wealth were based on birth. *Degrevant* reveals the potential for conflict in a shifting social landscape. Underlying the reconciliation with which the romance ends is a deployment of the trappings of chivalry to endorse aggression and violence as the normative way to achieve a social harmony identified with the privileges and property rights of great householders, both male and female.

In many ways the plot is a pastiche of familiar elements, situated in a recognisable contemporary landscape.⁹ While *Degrevant* is on crusade a neighbouring earl, without apparent motive, attacks his deer park and kills his foresters. *Degrevant*'s attempts to appeal first to the earl's sense of justice and then to his chivalric honour are equally futile, forcing him to fight back. When *Degrevant* challenges his enemy on his own ground, the earl's daughter, Melidor, watches from the castle walls. He is at once enamoured and pursues her into the castle, in the end winning her love. There are clandestine meetings in Melidor's chamber, a higher-ranking suitor who is defeated at a grand tournament, a spying steward, a helpful maid and numerous battles. In the end Melidor and her mother convince the earl that he has no choice but to accept *Degrevant*. They live long and prosper, and after his wife's death *Degrevant* returns to the Holy Land, to die on crusade.

Although the distinction is far too neat, it is possible to divide our attention between the plot, with its focus on the actions and motivations of the main characters, and the poem's extended description of the possessions which define them and the world in which they are placed. Both plot and description can be read as forms of social discourse, circumscribing the uneasy mix of violence and desire which defines the ethos of the romance. One of the few critical essays ever written on this romance argues that it is about the establishment of social order through the reconciliation of masculine aggression (*Degrevant* and the Earl) and the feminine commitment to order and harmony (Melidor, her mother) through marriage.¹⁰ This seems at first a plausible reading, but its reliance upon traditional moral schema and gender divisions prevents the author, A. S. G. Edwards, from noticing the ways in which the poem does not really reaffirm the binary opposition of male and female, private and public. His assumption that

the poem is neatly divided into 'two worlds ... this inner world of love and civilisation and an outer world of conflict and violence', is not borne out by a close examination of the loci of action in the romance, as I hope to show below, or even by history.¹¹ Recent work by scholars has revealed the extent to which women participated in what we would now define as social and economic activities – managing estates, pursuing legal actions, making and contesting wills, acting as cultural and religious patrons, seeking the favour of the powerful and the good will of peers.¹² Melidor and her mother and maid are as invested as men in the establishment of a household able to provide them with all that the romance represents as desirable – glamorous trappings, servants, and the power to enforce their desires.

Harmony may be a good thing, but it is not a virtue particularly associated with the strong-willed Melidor. Moreover the plot demonstrates that the impulse to order and peacefulness is impotent, unless enforced by superior strength. The first demonstration of this social reality comes when Degrevant, who 'thought werke be lawe / And wyth non oper schore' (151–2), sends a letter to the Earl, asking for restitution, or an explanation. The Earl's reply to the messenger makes adherence to the law a matter of personal choice, or 'will', a word which recurs frequently in this text: 'I wull, for thy lordes tene, / Honte hys foresstus and grene, / And breke his parkes by-dene' (189–91). The Earl's wife voices her objections to her husband's aggression (373–80) but he is deterred by Degrevant's deeds, not her words. Degrevant in turn is unpersuaded by the Countess's plea to leave them alone, now that he has won (425–8). What Degrevant wants is to 'quite hem his mede' (443), make the Earl pay in some way unspecified except for the 'many dowgthy [who] schall dey / Or hyt ende soo' (463–4). The restoration of damages Degrevant earlier sought, he tells his future mother-in-law, is no longer sufficient to end their private war. The narrative is triggered by an act of violence, and continues to pit knight against earl, daughter against father, until the Earl is utterly defeated. Degrevant's seemingly inexhaustible appetite for revenge poses a dilemma which has no social resolution, in a world without even the nominal presence of kings or prelates or judges or sheriffs or other lords, until the wedding at the end. The political and legal landscape is subsumed by the two rival households, with their adherents, dependants and allies circling in orbit around them. Only the appearance of Melidor, 'jentell and small / And lousom to seyght' (419–20) appears to offer a way out of this cycle of injury and retaliation.

The love affair does not evoke a truly alternative set of values, although the lovers' meetings do offer a refuge from the fighting. Even as they feast and snuggle in Melidor's chamber, the hostilities continue outside. The bodies of the Earl's supporters continue to pile up, until the Earl is forced by his daughter and wife to agree to his daughter's choice of a husband. Degrevant never doubts his ability to win Melidor, any more than he doubts his abilities to injure his enemies, and the two activities are always intermeshed. When he first sees her Degrevant promises himself 'that he shall loue þat swet wyzt, / Acheue how hit wold' (479–80). Even though he meets her first in an orchard, the traditional refuge of lovers, he has come there fully armed. When she insults him as a traitor, he dares her to call out her men, boasting that he will kill them all. Not surprisingly, she flees, but he is undeterred by the failure of his martial approach to courtship, and throughout the course of the affair his protestations of love alternate with threats to potential rivals. As he tells the maid who acts as go-between, no emperor or king is powerful enough 'hyr to bed bryng' (902) against his will. It is almost as if his fierce pride requires an unobtainable object of desire.

The maid plays a crucial role in bringing the lovers together – warning Degrevant of potential dangers and telling him how to get in to the castle. After Melidor has fled from her demanding suitor, it is the maid who forces her hand, saying she herself would be glad to accept him. Without admitting that negotiations are being opened, Melidor grudgingly tells her servant-companion to welcome him herself, 'in all þe devyl way' (792). Her jealous suspicions of what might have happened in the private supper her maid arranges are allayed when she is told that Degrevant has rewarded his squire, who acts as his confidant, with knighthood, marriage to Melidor's maid, and exactly 100 pounds of land, a remarkably extravagant grant. There is even a written charter which the maid offers as proof to her doubting mistress, who goes to the trouble of reading it carefully (975–8). In arranging their marriage Degrevant is doing more than rewarding faithful servants, or exhibiting the disinterested generosity appropriate to worthy heroes. The specificity of the transaction makes it clear it is more than one of the happy ancillary pairings so frequent in romance. Both in form (the bond confirming the grant, the formally plighted marriage intentions) and intent, the gift is an example of the romance's almost obsessive attention to legal and fiscal matters. Squire and maid will form the nucleus of the new household their marriage will create, and both rise with the fortunes of their lord and lady. The squire's loyalty and the maid's initiative suggest the multiple strategies ambi-

tious servants can employ to advance their own interests in a system based on the exchange of obligations and gifts.¹³ If the relationships of peers are seen as inevitably competitive, the relationship with subordinates is shown as mutually beneficial.

As a historian, Felicity Heal uses the this romance as a literary (and therefore exaggerated) example of the disorder created in the fifteenth century by rivalries between households, citing as exemplary the scene after the tournament in which Degrevant has mastered all his opponents. The knight, despite his victory, has not been proclaimed the victor by the Earl, or invited to the celebratory feast at the Earl's castle. Aggressively and dramatically Degrevant rides up to the dais where the Earl is feasting: 'To Mayd Myldor he ches, / And chalangys pat fre' (1219–20). By refusing to offer him the hospitality which Degrevant, knowing his obligations, has offered to his own retinue, the earl is refusing to acknowledge his right to 'gentilesse'. Degrevant has triumphed over a higher ranking suitor for Melidor's hand, winning the admiration of men and the love of countesses and queens for his skill, and in bursting in to his enemy's hall he is making the Earl's dishonour at denying him the prize 'public in the most dramatic manner possible for a householder'.¹⁴ The tournament brings their conflict into public viewing, providing the external audience which their feud lacks, in a forum which is meant to demonstrate and reinforce knightly values.¹⁵ And, from the beginning, the tournament, like the poem itself, makes public its conflation of the hero's love for his mistress with his contest for supremacy with other men.

Melidor is no mere bone of contention between men, however. She is as strong-willed as Degrevant, and unlike her mother appears uninterested in peace for its own sake. Like her lover and father she lives in the declarative mode, insisting dramatically that she will marry Degrevant despite her father's threats, and the presence of a much higher-ranking suitor: 'Shall I hym neuer for-sake, / What depe pat I take' (1750–1). Their first encounter matches his militant boldness with her sharp tongue. Even though we are told later that she too loves at first sight, her initial response is to berate him, and then the maid who intercedes on his behalf. Melidor is no representative of a feminised alternative to violence – indeed, Casson calls her a 'heroine of rather shrewish temper'.¹⁶ There is none of the interior debate associated with 'courtly love', rather an unexpected melange of self-protective prudence and the bold actions of romance. At one moment she demands to see the charter which confirms her maid's claim that Degrevant has betrothed her to his squire and settled 100 pounds of

land on them (973–8). At another she marches in to the middle of the tournament with a horse for her lover, announcing: ‘On þis stede wol I ryde / By my lemmanus syde’ (1318–19). Her determination to make her own choice is not justified by immoderate romantic passion, since she never lets love overwhelm her sense of her own prerogatives. For her, lover and potential marital partner are inseparable. When Degrevant begs for ‘mercy’ she tells him sternly that he will regret making such a request. Not even a king could ‘touchest ... swych þing’ without a formal marriage, and for that he needs her father’s assent, or ‘wylle’ (1530–50 *passim*). That will, initially the source of conflict between the two households, is finally overwhelmed by Degrevant’s slaughter of his men, his wife’s advice to make peace with the man he has wronged, and his daughter’s inflexible resolve. Her final threat ‘And giff 3e holde vs a gret, / Shall I neuer ete mete’ (1785–6) seems to break his spirit:

3e eorl for angur gan swet,
 And syzthe ful sar.
 ‘Damesele, ar þou be spylte,
 I for-giff þe þe gylte;
 Hit is all as þou wylte,
 I can say na mar.’ (1787–92)

Degrevant might not seem a suitable vehicle for expressing the ambitions of those who considered themselves ‘gentle’ without belonging to the nobility, for we are told at the beginning that he is Arthur’s nephew (perhaps a confusion with Agravain). Nonetheless the poet essentially forgets about his supposedly royal connections. In the beginning of the poem they seem to operate as a formulaic indicator of prestige and personal merit, as opposed to inherited status, since what is emphasised later is his social distance from Melidor’s family. As her maid tells him:

Hyr proferrys par amoure
 Bop dukes and emperoure,
 Hyt were hyr disonowre
 For to taken þe. (857–60)

Just before she receives him in her chamber, the poet reminds us that she is a ‘lady of heye kynn’ (1363).

Kate Mertes says that ‘every document discovered, every text reinterpreted confirms the view that all nobles and gentles, male and

female, expected their marriages to serve their families economically and politically'.¹⁷ Although *Degrevant*, with its insistence on the daughter's independence, might seem by this account a subversive text, in fact the marriage does serve Melidor's family, as she and her mother are astute enough to perceive. The earl's intransigence, representing the mindset of a closed class, is seen as both ineffective and short-sighted, since in all ways, from his prowess in battle to his generosity to minstrels to his hospitality to his own household, Degrevant is in fact a worthy custodian of his new family's line. Their extravagant wedding, attended by Emperors, cardinals, the douze peers of France, the King of Portugal, *et al.*, advances the message of the plot: men of wealth and gentility deserve access to the highest class, but only their own fiercest exertions will enable them to rise in a world where great magnates have the power to ride roughshod over such aspirations.

Love does in the romance what royal authority was often called upon to do in history – reconcile the warring parties. Marriage brings about a peaceful countryside and happy lovers, although in actual practice marriages were supposed to be arranged by parents and guardians, who saw marriage 'as a way of augmenting and consolidating their lands and rising in political power and influence ... [and ensuring] heirs to whom the inheritance would pass and who would safeguard it for future generations'.¹⁸ According to May McKisack, 'failure of heirs constituted by far the most serious threat to baronial stability ... [and] fathers of wealthy heiresses could take their pick among likely suitors'.¹⁹ Clearly however fathers and daughters do not always agree on what defines 'likely' and in this romance women prove that their judgement is superior. When the women in *Degrevant* urge the Earl to let his daughter marry as she wishes, they are speaking not just for individual happiness and peace but for a union which will strengthen the power of the landholding elite by recruiting someone worthy to support its claims.²⁰

And, in so speaking, they underline their essential role in household formation. Melidor can not be read as a mere token of alliance between men. The Paston letters, an extensive collection, among the earliest in English and arguably the most interesting, provide ample evidence that women can be crucial to a family's success. The Pastons were an ambitious and energetic family moving up the ranks in fifteenth-century Norfolk, and the letters show women making marriages, hectoring children to push themselves forward at court, organising family resources, negotiating with potential allies and rivals and sometimes literally holding the fort.²¹ 'Ryt wurchipful hwsbond', begins one letter from Margaret Paston to her husband, John, 'I recomawnd

me to you, and prey yow to gete som crosse bowis, and wyndacys to bynd them wyth.’²² When gaining and maintaining status and property was as consuming and potentially dangerous as it was in the later Middle Ages, a family which could count on the efforts of all its members in its collective drive to succeed was much more likely to prevail over its rivals.²³ As John Carmi Parsons points out, ‘marriage, motherhood, and kinship ... were indispensable to the family ... women thus retained claims to power and influence within the feudal family’.²⁴ In the late Middle Ages a noble home is not the Victorian ‘haven in a heartless world’ but a kind of command post in the constant struggle for familial aggrandisement.

Like Edwards and Davenport in their readings of the poem, I have constantly referred to violence as a problem to be ‘solved’ by the happy ending. However, this reading is both too simple and anachronistic, since those in the upper ranks saw violence as a legitimate tool for defending their honour, and the law and social practice enabled them to do so in a way we would find intolerable.²⁵ Degrevant’s actions are never directly critiqued. As Philippa Maddern says, ‘the violent and destructive activities of fifteenth-century knights were thus surrounded by so great a cloud of laudatory adjectives – worthy, worshipful, manly, doughty, invincible, fierce – that no disapproval could touch them’.²⁶ What makes Degrevant’s role as landholder different from his role as crusader is that the earl is not a pagan, a distant enemy, a usurper – he is a neighbour. Nonetheless, even among neighbours, violence is ‘one option available to county families in their constant pursuit of land, status and power’.²⁷ Even intimate relations are not exempt. Mertes refers to marriage and the family as ‘calculated battlegrounds’, a formulation painfully represented in the story of poor Margery Paston, who chose to marry the family bailiff and was beaten and repudiated by her family at her mother’s instigation.²⁸ We need to understand the way violence appears culturally normal, inseparable from the highest chivalric ideals which make Degrevant so appealing a hero, for Melidor, the audience at the tournament, and lay members of late medieval society.²⁹ Since the earl cannot be dislodged, Degrevant must turn to the feud as a way of settling disputes, combining defence of his property and dependants with forced negotiations, in the guise of chivalric heroism.

Against this reading of incessant social strife in the action of the narrative, I want to juxtapose a complementary reading of stability, tradition and public power embedded in its descriptive elements. Here I would like to focus on the class and gender implications of its particular materiality, its noteworthy attention to the trappings of

wealth and status as both economic and symbolic capital. In a poem of fewer than 2,000 lines, over 200 by my count are devoted to extended representations of possessions. The concerns of a social order based on adherence to law and protection of property are associated with Degrevant. He is a peculiar mix of romance hero and prudent landowner. On the one hand he is a crusader and a member of the Round Table, compared to Gawain and Perceval in prestige, Arthur's nephew. He triumphs in battle and tournament, a figure aligned with courtly (and even aristocratic) romance. What Melidor sees is a figure who 'with gold and azour ful schen / ... / Was ioy to be-hold' (470-2). At first Degrevant appears to belong to a literary tradition which exists in many places and no particular place at all. As the tale progresses we see a somewhat different figure, a prudent landowner, whose wealth comes from carefully guarded possessions – his parks and woods, his rivers, his game, his towns, his tenants and their farms, all precisely enumerated:

Ther was sesyd in hys hand
 A þousand poundus worth off land
 Off rentes well settand,
 And muchell dell more;
 An hounded plows in demaynus,
 Fayer parkes in-wyth haynus,
 Grett herdus in þe playnus,
 Wyth muchell tame store;
 Castelos wyth heygh wallus,
 Chambors wyth noble hallus,
 Fayer stedes in the stallus,
 Lyard and soore. (65-76)

This hero is rooted in a particular social landscape and set of material practices. We are given the details of his stewardship when the poet describes how he rebuilds what the Earl has destroyed, re-enclosing parks, loaning seed, oxen, wagons and horses to his dependants (145-50). His first instinct seems to be to conserve and to 'werke be lawe' (151). In the poem's lovingly itemised enumeration of the possessions which define a noble life, it is the deer park, however, rather than cattle and serfs, which is most suffused with meaning, representing what I have called the nexus of symbolic and actual capital. We are told, in more detail than we are told about his activities as a knight of the Round Table, that hunting is Degrevant's greatest pleasure, and the

park is the terrain in which the he and the Earl contest for supremacy. As Christopher Dyer notes,

game symbolised the aristocratic style of life. It was nurtured in private parks or protected in forests and chases. The fences that separated the game from the non-aristocrats, like moats, castle walls and monastic precincts, gave physical expression to social barriers. Hunting parties provided the aristocracy with their principal diversion, and they accompanied the chase with rituals and ceremonies. If the cost of game is counted in terms of the expense of fencing parks, the loss of rent from land of potential agricultural use, and the labour expended in its capture, every piece of venison would have been very valuable indeed.³⁰

In English history, from the forest laws of the Plantagenets on, the right to hunt was inextricably linked to the power to prevent others from hunting. The Earl's literal overriding of Degrevant's rights to an aristocratic way of life is a denial of law, and of a chivalric ideal:

He hade a grete spyt of þe knyght
That was so hardy and wyght,
And thought howe he best myght
That dowghty to grade. (101-4)

The Earl's unmotivated disdain for his neighbour, his aggressive contempt, seems to identify social rigidity, the aristocratic desire to maintain social exclusivity, with social destructiveness. 'To grade' means to put down from high rank, demote, depose, humble, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*.³¹ The deer park, rather than the castle, is the field on which competing claims are fought out. One might argue that what separates the Earl from Degrevant is not class, but rank. He is not a landless knight who needs a wealthy marriage, since we are told both that he is rich in his own right, and that he wants no dowry with Melidor, preferring 'hyr body all bare' (571-6), by which he obviously means stripped of the trappings of wealth.

Degrevant's noble character makes him an ideal match for the Earl's daughter, despite his lack of title. His exemplary qualities as knight and landowner seem then to identify social investment – the literal and figurative care of land and tenants – with his worthiness to rise in status. In the figure of Degrevant we can see a rewriting of nobility in ways which value individual worth, a term with both

economic and social implications, as well as birth. In many romances the apparently lower-ranking suitor – *Havelok*, *William of Palerne* – turns out to be of equal or higher rank. However, Degrevant's lower rank is no impediment either to the poet or to those who celebrate the wedding at the end. When Melidor chooses Degrevant, she validates the aspirations of a landholding elite which defined itself as 'gentle', and hoped to be able to advance through marriage. He is a chivalric hero, who is aggressive in his own defence, but does not share the Earl's destructive appropriation of the wealth of those under him, his contempt for their rights. Degrevant, of course, gets to marry up, because he is represented as 'just as good as' if not better than the Earl, not in alternate, but in the same ways. Both Dyer and Mertes argue that, for the late Middle Ages, despite an overwhelming concern with rank and birth, in cultural and ideological terms, gentle, noble, and aristocratic are roughly equivalent labels.³² In *Degrevant*, as in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, true gentillesse is pitted against the snobbery of a titled class, which has to open up to those worthy of it, but is not transformed in its fundamental values.

Melidor, as a dependent female, does not of course have investment capital of her own, but as her father's daughter she is a conduit to his estates, and she is loaded with symbolic capital. She is not the 'body all bare' Degrevant claims to be the object of his desire (574), but a body that bears all the signs of her family's rank and status. At first sight merely 'jentell and small' (419) she becomes at next sight 'comlech y-clade', and accompanied by 'to ryche banrettes' (473–4), knights of the same rank as Degrevant. When he actually meets with her in the orchard, her body is armored with clothing which delights Degrevant without being sexually enticing, since it never hints at the nakedness beneath. For two stanzas the poet emphasises the wealth and fashion of her attire:

Sche come in a vyolet
 With why3th perl ouerfret,
 And saphyrus perinne i-sett
 On eueryche a syde;
 All of pall-work fyn
 With nouche and nevyn,
 Anurled with ermyn,
 And ouert for pryde.
 To tell hur botenus was toor,
 Anamelede with a3our;
 With topyes hur trechour

Ouertrasyd þat tyde.
 Sche was receuyd a spanne
 Of any lyuand manne;
 Off rede golde þe rybanne
 Glemyd hur gyde. (641–56)

Structurally, this passage is very similar to the one which describes Degrevant's coat-of-arms (1045–56), or the scene cited above (465–72) in which Melidor first watches him from the walls. In these descriptions clothes identify the wearer to an observant world, and the symmetry of the descriptions suggests that neither for men nor women is there an identity – an embodied self – distinct from the social self.³³

More famous than her clothes, although equally significant of her family's wealth and power, is her chamber, which is described at enormous length. (William Morris apparently painted scenes from the romance on the walls of the 'House Beautiful' in Kent.)³⁴ For five full stanzas the poem describes the architecture and decoration of this 'chamber of love'. L. F. Casson calls this description ambitious, but a failure: it is meant to be a Bower of Bliss, but the details seem jumbled and unlikely to 'stupefy the ... senses'.³⁵ Davenport, on the other hand, finds it 'the stuff of fantasy and dream, the emotional high point of the poem ... Here the indoor world of the castle has its fullest realisation; Degrevant has penetrated to the heart of the castle; he has successfully moved from outside the walls, into the orchard, the hall, and now the private chamber, which proves to be an Aladdin's cave of wealth, art and history as well as a chapel of Venus.'³⁶ A close reading of the actual text makes it hard to agree with such judgements, without accepting the literary and gender assumptions upon which they are based. As I have already argued, women's sphere in the great households might have been distinct, but it did not represent an alternative set of values. Looking at the details without the preconception that they must represent, as Edwards says, 'the inner world of love and civilisation ... the world of the feminine,' can make us understand the description differently. What follows gives some sense of the exuberance of the poet's description of what the chamber contains:

Per was a ryal rooffe
 In þe chaumbur of loffe;
 Hyt was buskyd a-boue
 With besauntus ful brygth;

...

Endentyd and dyzth;
 Per men myzth se, ho þat wolde,
 Arcangelus of rede golde,
 Fyfty mad of o molde,
 Lowynge ful lyzth;
 With þe Pocalyps of Jon,
 Þe Powlus Pystolus euerychon,
 Þe Parabolus of Salamon. (1441–55)

This is hardly the intimate space associated with the bedchambers of romance, where Lancelot and Guenevere, Floris and Blanche fleur, Troilus and Criseyde, find erotic joy. Although Melidor's bed has silken sheets and is decorated with the story of Ydoine and Amadace, 'þe kyngus owun banere' on the tester is a potent reminder of what she represents (1501–2). In real life even the pope had birds and flowers in his bedchamber at Avignon, not saints or theologians or political symbols. There is a long tradition of detailed description of building decoration in medieval literature and various models have been suggested for this remarkable scheme. Davenport looks at both the well-known wall paintings at Longthorpe Tower, French and English romances, and allegorical court poetry, without finding any particular source. However, the wall paintings or statues in French romances or Chaucer's dream visions act to reinforce the text's themes – the story of Dido and Aeneas, statues of Venus, scenes from the *Romance of the Rose* – in a way which does not seem to happen here. The details are too abstract and confused to allow for an iconographic analysis, but it is clear that they have nothing to do with stories of lovers, nor do they have any particular female associations – no Mary, no female saints, just unrelieved patriarchy.

I would like to suggest two other models, both of which seem to me to offer a better reading of what is actually in the poem, rather than what we expect of women's chambers. The first is the bedchamber of the Countess Adela de Blois, daughter of William the Conqueror, as described by Baudri de Bourgueil, in a panegyric addressed to her. According to Baudri, who admits that he might be exaggerating for the sake of praise, she has a mappemounde, tapestries with scenes from the bible and pagan mythology, and one showing her father's conquest of England, bedposts with figures of philosophy and the seven liberal arts – in short, the possessions of her father's daughter. Historians have primarily been interested in Baudri's poem because the extensively described tapestry of William's English invasion might be the earliest reference to the Bayeux tapestry, but for us it is of interest because the

room's furnishings are meant to demonstrate Adela's learning, her religious virtues and connection to her father.³⁷ Although the details are different from those in the English text, the effect is the same – a space which is a public announcement of the inhabitant's status as female heir.

The other model I want to suggest is the great architectural and artistic works associated with Westminster, which in the second half of the fourteenth century benefited from royal and ecclesiastical interest in building and decoration.³⁸ Edith Rickert mentions as evidence of the splendid art of the period the hammerbeam roof and carved and painted angels of Westminster Hall which offers a possible inspiration for the elaborate ceiling of Melidor's room, with its fifty archangels.³⁹ Another possible inspiration was the king's 'Painted Chamber', which was both bedroom and state apartment. The Chapel of St Stephen, like Melidor's chamber, had elaborate paintings and stained glass windows. The most striking analogue to the details listed in the romance, however, can be found in the chapter house at Westminster, which contained a series of depictions of the Apocalypse. My study of Kathleen Scott's index of British manuscript images reveals no comparable combination of subjects elsewhere, nor does A. Caiger-Smith's catalogue of surviving English wall paintings.⁴⁰ According to Rickert, these pictures, which constitute the best-known paintings of the Apocalypse in England, are unique in being accompanied by text.⁴¹ In Melidor's chamber the Epistles of Paul and the parables of Solomon may exist as text rather than image – the wording is ambiguous. The Chapter House would have been well known since parliament met there in the fourteenth century.⁴² Its paintings, arranged in five arcades, are crammed with details, just like the chamber. Each scene is divided into smaller units, packed with figures, including symbols of the evangelists, and heads of angels in the corners, although it would take a miniaturist and a larger building to include the nine worthies and the story of Absalon and the four doctors and the philosophers which the poet enumerates.

These two models suggest that in fact the division between public and private which the chamber is taken to represent, like the division between male and female audiences, is a misleading opposition. There are certainly romances, such as *Troilus and Criseyde* or *Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the lovers meet in a secluded and sexually charged space. However, Melidor meets her suitor in a room in which the private – the conversation of the lovers – and the public – the cultural heritage represented by the art and artefacts – are interwoven. This interpenetration of spheres is not an anomaly, in a world filled with

servants, where queens received petitioners in their bedchambers, where ladies gathered with their attendants to read, sew, converse and take care of household and religious business and where receiving visitors was part of the duty of the nobility.⁴³ Because the economic and social work of the household takes place in chambers as well as halls, the medieval bedchamber can never be assumed to be private or intimate – the so-called ‘inner world of the feminine’ – in the ways that we understand the modern bedroom to be. In the provocatively titled, ‘In Bed with Joan of Kent’, W. M. Ormrod discusses the ‘spatial politics’ of noble women’s bedchambers, arguing that they must inevitably carry connotations beyond the personal.⁴⁴

So far in my essay I have focused on the material and symbolic context in which the action of the romance is immersed. I want to conclude by looking briefly at the two manuscripts in which the romance is found, each representing very distinctive tastes. These two very different collections show that the romance appealed to different audiences, crossing the boundaries of gender and position. The claim that this work is a legitimate representation of female desire is justified by its appearance in the famous Findern Manuscript (Cambridge University Ff.1.6), a fifteenth-century collection of courtly poetry associated with the North-East Midlands family of the Finderns, a gentry family with aristocratic connections.⁴⁵ This is just the sort of household that might have been attracted to a story about social triumph through marriage. Over a long period of time the family and their friends assembled poetry by Chaucer, Lydgate, Gower and others written in a courtly style and concerned with sentiment, especially love. The manuscript shows a remarkable consistency of taste, and a number of amateur hands, suggesting a very personal connection between owners and contents. Because of the presence of women’s names at various points in the manuscript, some scholars have gone so far as to argue that some of the poems, including *Degrevant*, the only romance in the collection, were copied by female scribes. Although not everyone would agree that Elisabet Koton and Elisabet frauncys, whose names appear at the end of the romance, were its actual copyists, it is fair to say that women were among its eager readers and enjoyed its endorsement of its heroine’s determination to get her own way in love.⁴⁶ Of course, it would also be fair to title a study of this romance ‘What Men Want’ since the only other place it appears is in an even better-known collection, the Thornton manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral 91), an important anthology of romances compiled by Robert Thornton, also a member of a gentry family, around 1440.⁴⁷ His more eclectic collec-

tion of romances and saints' lives includes among other works the only copy of the decidedly unsentimental *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, *The Erl of Tolous*, *Sir Perceval*, *Octavian* and *Isumbras*, works which can be seen as articulating more conventionally moral and patriarchal values than *Degrevant*. Its presence in two such different but equally individual sets of texts has interesting implications for a study of romance's ability as a genre to appeal simultaneously to multiple audiences. Men and women, sharing the same culture and the same households, might equally enjoy the story. Men identifying with the heroic *Degrevant* and women with the intrepid *Melidor* would both be participating imaginatively in the world of display and power of the great landholding magnates. *Melidor*'s extravagant possessions remind us that women's identity can not be separated from their class position, as the romance amply demonstrates. What she desires is what makes her desirable – *Degrevant* is a suitable consort for the space which surrounds her, just as she guarantees his right to his deer. Together they will form the nucleus of the ideal household – one earned by chivalric violence and female will.

Notes

- 1 The best edition is *The Romance of Sir Degrevant: A Parallel-Text Edition from MSS. Lincoln Cathedral A. 5. 2 and Cambridge University Ff. I. 6*, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS o.s. 221 (London, 1949). All citations will be from the Cambridge text, which is the most complete.
- 2 W. A. Davenport, 'Sir Degrevant and composite romance', in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson (eds), *Medieval Insular Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 111–31 (p. 114).
- 3 Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household: 1250–1600* (Oxford, 1988). See also her article, 'Aristocracy', in Rosemary Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth Century Attitudes* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 42–60.
- 4 'The late Middle Ages has, with much justification, been described as "the age of the household" and peculiarly of the noble household', according to Felicity Heal, nor is she alone in that judgement. See her 'Reciprocity and exchange in the late medieval household', in Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds), *Bodies and Disciplines* (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 179–98 (p. 179). David Starkey says, 'In the later Middle Ages household and family were (to an extent inconceivable today) the central institution of society': 'The age of the household: politics, society and the arts c. 1350–c. 1550', in Stephen Medcalf (ed.), *The Later Middle Ages* (New York, 1981), pp. 225–90 (p. 225).
- 5 Mertes, *The English Noble Household*, p. 184.
- 6 See, for example, Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle*

- Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 50, 90, 108. Dyer routinely includes marriage as an economic activity, as do Mertes, Starkey and Heal.
- 7 Two articles in Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (eds), *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom*, Studies in Medieval Culture 37 (Kalamazoo, 1998) deal with the tension between individual choice and family control in the making of English marriages: Jacqueline Murray, 'Individualism and consensual marriage: some evidence from medieval England' (pp. 121–51), and Shannon McSheffrey, "'I will never have none ayenst my faders will": consent and the making of marriage in the late medieval diocese of London' (pp. 153–74).
 - 8 Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 47.
 - 9 Davenport, 'Degrevant and composite romance', shows in the course of his discussion how many traditions and texts this romance draws upon. See also *Sir Degrevant*, ed. Casson, pp. lxii–lxxii, and Laura Hibbard, *Mediaeval Romance in England* (1924, rept. New York 1963), pp. 306–11, for a discussion of sources and analogues.
 - 10 A. S. G. Edwards, 'Gender, order and reconciliation in *Sir Degrevant*', in Carol M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 53–64.
 - 11 Edwards, 'Gender, order and reconciliation', p. 56.
 - 12 Jennifer Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1992) and (ed.), *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry* (Manchester, 1995), a collection of documents. These contain the most extensive study of English women of the upper classes. Karen Jambeck, 'Patterns of women's literary patronage: England, 1200–ca. 1475', in June Hall McCash (ed.), *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (Athens, GA, 1996), pp. 228–65.
 - 13 See Heal, 'Reciprocity and exchange', p. 180 and Mertes, 'Aristocracy', p. 48.
 - 14 Heal, 'Reciprocity and exchange', p. 192.
 - 15 Maurice Keen calls tournaments 'a powerful force towards generalising both the standards and the rituals of European chivalry'. *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), p. 83; he devotes an entire chapter to the tournament.
 - 16 *Sir Degrevant*, ed. Casson, p. lxxv.
 - 17 Mertes, 'Aristocracy', p. 45.
 - 18 Ward, *English Noblewomen*, p. 15.
 - 19 May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 259–60.
 - 20 Jennifer Ward discusses the ways in which noble families sought to maintain their lineage, through inheritance and marriage, in 'Noblewomen, family and identity in later medieval Europe', in Anne J. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 245–62.
 - 21 *Paston Letters*, ed. and selected by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1958).
 - 22 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 - 23 Mertes, 'Aristocracy', pp. 45–7.
 - 24 John Carmi Parsons, 'Introduction: family, sex, and power', in John Carmi Parsons (ed.), *Medieval Queenship* (New York, 1993), pp. 1–22 (p. 3).

- 25 Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1999), p. 28.
- 26 Philippa Maddern, *Violence and Social Order* (Oxford, 1992), p. 78.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 28 Mertes, 'Aristocracy', p. 45; *Paston Letters*, ed. Davis, pp. 74–6.
- 29 Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, p. 12.
- 30 Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 61.
- 31 *MED*, grade, v. 2.
- 32 Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 47; Mertes, 'Aristocracy', p. 44.
- 33 Nicola McDonald points out how 'bright women who shine, like costly treasures, incite the adventure-lust of ambitious men': 'The Seege of Troye: "[f]or wham was wakened al this wo"?', in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds), *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (London, 2000), pp. 181–99 (p. 195). In *Degrevant* both men and women are desired for their ornamented beauty. See also Susan Crane, *The Performance of the Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, 2002).
- 34 Hibbard, *Medieval Romance*, p. 308.
- 35 *Sir Degrevant*, ed. Casson, p. lxxiv.
- 36 Davenport, 'Degrevant and composite romance', pp. 124–5.
- 37 Shirley Ann Brown and Michael Herren, 'The *Adelae Comitissae* of Baudri of Bourgueil and the Bayeux Tapestry', in Richard Gameson (ed.), *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 139–55 (p. 153). I am indebted to Jocelyn Wogan-Browne for pointing out this parallel.
- 38 Edith Rickert, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1954), pp. 147–51.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 40 Kathleen Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, 2 vols (London, 1996), vol. 2; A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (Oxford, 1963).
- 41 Rickert, *Painting in Britain*, pp. 162–3.
- 42 Caroline Babington, Tracy Manning and Sophie Stewart, *Our Painted Past* (London, 1999), p. 30. McKisack lists the wide range of those invited to attend parliament in the later Middle Ages: 'lords spiritual and temporal, certain councillors and officials, proctors for the clergy, and representatives of shires, cities, and boroughs': *The Fourteenth Century*, p. 182.
- 43 Ward, *English Noblewomen*, pp. 71–3; Parsons, 'Introduction', p. 10.
- 44 W. M. Ormrod, 'In bed with Joan of Kent', in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (eds), *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 277–92. See also, in the same volume, Colin Richmond, 'Elizabeth Clere: Friend of the Pastons' (pp. 251–73), which is a detailed study of the ways in which 'business' is taken care of during women's talk.
- 45 Rossell Hope Robbins, 'The Findern anthology', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 610–42, and Sarah McNamer, 'Female authors, provincial setting: the reversing of courtly love in the Findern manuscript', *Viator*, 22 (1991), 279–310. Davenport also notes the association of the Findern manuscript

and female interests, 'Degrevant and composite romance', pp. 112–13.

- 46 John J. Thompson, 'Collecting Middle English romances and some related book-production activities in the later Middle Ages', in Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol M. Meale (eds), *Romance in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 17–38 (p. 34).
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 19.