Putting the pulp into fiction: the lump-child and its parents in *The King of Tars*

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The central figure of the Middle English popular romance known as *The King of Tars* (hereafter *KT*) – a formless lump of flesh born instead of a child – defines a certain view of popular literature. The birth is an outrageously sensationalist event; the ideological message conveyed by its subsequent transformation into a human being through baptism is simplistic, vulgar and racist. By its unfinished aspect, moreover, the formless lump parallels the work's rudimentary and unsophisticated poetic quality. And yet, the lump is a powerful image, which repels and fascinates by its very crudity. In a manner characteristic of popular art, it exceeds the limitations of the work which presents it, while attempts to reduce it to a merely aesthetic or rational object fail to capture its quiddity.

It is around this central void of the interpretation-defying thing, however, that the ideological and literary systems of individual versions of the story are organised; and these systems demand analysis. This essay concentrates on the treatment of the lump in order to show how its treatment throws into relief the different configurations of paternity and maternity, of gender roles and of religious politics put forward in a range of re-tellings. Three kinds of critical analysis are put forward, progressively narrowing the focus of study. Building on Lillian Herlands Hornstein's impressive scholarship, I begin by studying analogues of *KT* drawn from medieval chronicles; these analogues allow an appreciation of features shared by the different narratives. The second section turns to the Auchinleck text of *KT*. Here my argument will be constructed around two sorts of theory equally concerned with problems of order: medieval physiology and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Integrating historical conceptualisation with modern conceptualisation deepens both, for it allows the historical specificities of the texts

under discussion and of the discussion itself to emerge more sharply. Finally, important ideological issues are clarified through detailed textual comparison of the Auchinleck text with the Vernon, another of the three surviving redactions of the poem.¹

The plot of *KT* relates how the Sultan of Damascus falls in love by hearsay with the daughter of the Christian King of Tars.² Initially the Princess rejects him, but after the Christian army is routed she relents to spare her people further suffering, and pleads with her father to allow the match. Once at his court, she discovers that the Sultan will not marry her until she adopts his religion; this she outwardly does, although in her heart she keeps faith with Christ. When in due course she bears a child, it is a formless lump of flesh, without life or limb:

& when þe child was ybore
Wel sori wimen were perfore,
For lim no hadde it non.
Bot as a rond of flesche yschore
In chaumber it lay hem bifore
Wipouten blod & bon.
For sorwe þe leuedi wald dye
For it hadde noiþer nose no eye,
Bot lay ded as þe ston.
Þe soudan com to chaumber þat tide,
& wiþ his wiif he gan to chide
þat wo was hir bigon.³

Attributing this misfortune to his wife's insincere conversion, the Sultan takes the lump to his temple and prays to his 'goddes' (625) to give it human form, but to no avail. He destroys the idols and returns the lump to the Princess, who proposes that the whole episode be treated as a duel of faiths: both husband and wife will embrace whichever god can transform the lump. The Princess summons a Christian priest from her husband's dungeons to christen the lump, whereupon it instantly becomes a beautiful boy. Overwhelmed, the Sultan has himself christened, occasioning a further miracle:

His hide, þat blac & lopely was,
Al white bicom, þurth Godes gras,
& clere wipouten blame. (928–30)

The Sultan calls on his Christian father-in-law to help him convert his

people and a battle against heathen lords ensues. The Auchinleck manuscript text breaks off in what look like the concluding moments of this battle, with the triumph of Christianity and the conversion or massacre of the Saracen prisoners; the ending of manuscripts Vernon and Simeon will be discussed below.

Most of the medieval analogues discussed by Lillian Herlands Hornstein, the principal authority on this subject, derive from chronicles recounting the conversion to Christianity of the heathen Cassanus, king of the Tartars. This conversion is brought about by the birth to Cassanus and a Christian woman of a monstrous child miraculously transformed into a beautiful boy through baptism. Its result is, according to the version, either a Tartar victory over the Sultan of Damascus and a possible Christian reconquest of Jerusalem, or the mass conversion of the Tartars.⁴ Some of these analogues have the child born half-animal and half-human, others half-hairy and half-smooth or completely hairy: 'hispidus et pilosus, velut ursus'⁵ (hairy and shaggy, like a bear). The analogy is echoed in one of the versions in which the child is a formless lump:

Accidit ut regina die sancti [Francisci] primum ederet partum, pudibundum regno magis quam iucundum, ursi non viri praeferens pignus, utpote frustum informe carnis, non filium.⁶

[It happened that on St Francis's day the queen gave birth to her first child, more to the kingdom's shame than to its rejoicing, bringing forth the child of a bear not a man, rather a formless piece of flesh than a son.]

Bear-cubs in bestiary and Physiologus tradition are said to be born small lumps of eyeless white flesh which their mothers gradually shape by licking and animate by breathing life into them.⁷ In the majority of these analogues, therefore, the child can be understood to be semi-bestial. This semi-bestiality is open to different interpretations. In a number of cases the father fails to recognise his own son and accuses the mother of adultery.⁸ The outcome implies, however, that the child's illegitimate form symbolises the interfaith marriage from which it arises. Moreover, the child's animal side suggests a sub-human aspect to its father. This is accentuated in *KT*, where both narrator and characters repeatedly compare the Sultan and his men to animals. To cite only one of many examples: when his messengers claim that the

King has described him as a 'hepen hounde' (93) the Sultan rages like a 'wilde bore' (98) and a 'lyoun' (105), thus ironically exceeding the designation to which he objects. If this understanding is valid, the monstrosity of the lump-child is directly inherited from its heathen father in a process comparable to what today would be called genetic inheritance. The same thinking probably lies behind those of Hornstein's analogues which make the child black on its left and white on its right side. These resonate with the racial theme of *KT*, in which the Princess is 'white as feper of swan' (12) and the Sultan before his transformation 'blac & lopely' (928). However, neither of those two analogues discussed by Hornstein which have a parti-coloured child refers to colour difference between the parents; the argument seems instead to be religious, for the public event explained by the private miracle in these versions is the Tartar king's request to the Pope for religious teachers and the consequent mission of two friars, rather than the military crusade to liberate the Holy Land favoured by most other versions.⁹ In the chronicle analogues, the child's physical imperfection is the symbol and embodiment of its father's spiritual irregularity, the fleshly revelation of his inferior religious status. Before their christening, father and son are deemed sub-human to the degree that each represents only the crude form of a human being, lacking that spiritual dimension which properly distinguishes humans from the other animals. Baptism refines the animal-heathen substance to create a superior being – hairless, white, fully human.

Where the analogues present the lump primarily as its father's child, the Auchinleck text of *KT* draws on Aristotelian conception theory, in which the mother contributes only the basic matter, the material, fleshly substance, from which the child will be made. *Mater* (mother), as we are often reminded, was thought in the Middle Ages to be derived etymologically from *materia* (matter).¹⁰ The father, through his seed, supplies the 'life or spirit or form', that vital principle which transforms the matter into a human child and animates it.¹¹ As the Princess knows, it is this second element that the lump lacks:

Ȝif it were cristned arȝt
It schuld haue fourme to se bi ȝȝt
Wiȝ lim & liif to wake. (760–2)

Fourme here has its technical sense. Shapeless, lifeless chunk of flesh, the lump-child is a fictional approximation to Aristotelian matter, the result of a conception in which the paternal role has failed. While the

Sultan's biological parenthood is admitted, the lump's inhumanity is not, as in the analogues, its father's contribution, the direct transmission of his paganism; here there is simply no paternal input at all. The particular monstrosity of the lump in *KT* results from the fact that it is exclusively its mother's child. The wider ideological implications of this paternal failure are clear in the scene in which the Sultan begs his gods to give the lump human shape:

& when he hadde al ypreyd,
 & alle þat euer he coupe he seyð,
 Þe flesche lay stille as ston. (637–9)

Stille as ston, a repeated phrase, links the lump's insensibility to that of the idols which will fail either to heed the Sultan's prayer or to feel the blows by which he renders them as formless and limbless as his child (659).¹² Lump and idols are equally deficient in being confined to the material world, which is also the maternal world. The crude stuff of incomplete humanity is denoted moreover by the term *þe flesche*, used consistently to describe the lump before its transformation. Historians argue for a conceptual distinction in the Middle Ages between body and flesh, the former a symbolically ordered entity allied with the soul but the latter vulnerable and excessive.¹³ Body was gendered masculine, flesh feminine.¹⁴ These terms are helpful in considering *KT*, where the lump begins as maternal, feminine flesh and ends as paternal, masculine body; the transition occurring at the moment when the child passes by baptism from the domain of the mother, herself a Christian but, paradoxically, associated figuratively with unredeemed heathendom, to enter the Christian order.

Aristotle's view of the father as giver of the form that shapes matter is paralleled by Lacan's description of the paternal function as the imposition of order on the chaos of nature (by this means the father symbolises the differential structure of the Law). Whereas Aristotle's focus is on the insufficiencies of the mother, however, Lacan's is on those of the father; moreover, Aristotle grounds his discussions of paternity and maternity in biology (thus providing them with the ideological camouflage afforded by an association with 'nature'), while Lacan emphasises the political dimensions of both. Lacan's writings of the early and mid 1950s, in particular, provide an analytical tool for understanding the complex construction of and the anxieties about paternity which ring through these medieval texts.¹⁵ Like many medieval works, they pose the question which, according to Lacan, is the great question of

Freudian psychoanalysis: 'what does it mean to be a father?'¹⁶ For Lacan, the distinctive paternal task is above all a matter of rendering humans distinct from animals, especially by regulating sexuality:

The primordial Law is ... that which in regulating marriage ties superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating. The prohibition of incest is merely its subjective pivot, revealed by the modern tendency to reduce to the mother and the sister the objects forbidden to the subject's choice, although full licence outside of these is not yet entirely open.

This law, then, is revealed clearly enough as identical with an order of language. For without kinship nominations, no power is capable of instituting the order of preferences and taboos that bind and weave the yarn of lineage through succeeding generations.¹⁷

The paternal function thus appears symbolically in two activities which distinguish human marriage practices from the unconstrained copulation of animals: the creation and enforcement, on the one hand of kin groups defined by the inscription of a lineage descending through the father, and on the other, of marriage rules forbidding certain relations between members of the various groups. Lacan proposes a characteristically punning mnemonic to delineate the intimate connection he sees between the two essential activities which define paternal authority: 'le nom du père' (the father's name) is also by homophony 'le non du père' (the father's no).

In *KT*, the Sultan's failure to father his child relates to precisely these two activities. Lacan's proposal to extend the regulation of marriage ties beyond the incest taboo (dear to structuralist anthropology) allows it to include the mixed-religion marriage that *KT* designates as unlawful:

Wel lope war a Cristen man
To wedde an hepen woman
 Pat leued on fals lawe;
Als loþ was þat soudan
To wed a Cristen woman,
 As y finde in mi sawe. (409–14)

By resolving that his bride must convert before he will consummate their marriage, the heathen Sultan attempts to impose a sexual prohibition

whose legitimacy is upheld by the text. However, he is deceived by her outward show of conversion and unwittingly breaks his own rule, thus aligning himself with what Lacan terms ‘nature abandoned to the law of mating’. The Sultan’s inability to impose the symbolic separation of the human from the natural domain is confirmed by the numerous comparisons of him and other Saracens to wild beasts (e.g. 93, 98, 105) and by the repeated derogatory references to his wild or near-insane behaviour (e.g. 196, 404). It seems that the desire to produce oneself and others as true human beings by adhering to the tenets of a symbolic law is common to all human creatures; but, according to the poem, only dupes believe that a ‘hepen lawe’ (504) can fulfil this symbolic function. The Christian God is the sole creator of human beings. Baptism installs this God as Father and enables the child to be born out of the maternal substance, which in itself is insufficiently differentiated from the animal domain.

Yet the child’s baptism is not the end, for although it raises the child to human status, it does not permit the Sultan to impose a line of patrilineal descent. As the Princess tells him after the lump’s transformation, this is not a question of biology; symbolic paternity can function only within Christianity:

Pe soudan seyð, ‘Leman min,
 Ywis ich am glad afin
 Of þis child þat y se.’
 ‘Ȝa, sir, bi seyn Martin,
 Ȝif þe haluendel wer þin
 Wel glad miȝt þou be.’
 ‘O dame,’ he seyð, ‘hou is þat?
 Is it nouȝt min þat y biȝat?’
 ‘No sir,’ þan seyð sche,
 ‘Bot þou were cristned so it is
 Þou no hast no part þeron, ywis,
 Noiþer of þe child ne of me.’ (805–16)

The paternity lacking pertains not to the Sultan’s acknowledged physical fatherhood but to his right to be named as the child’s father. For a father to be so recognised in any society a whole range of cultural and institutional forces must be mobilised and criteria met. The single criterion highlighted in *KT*, however, is Christianity. Patrilineage, which Lacan claims to be a defining characteristic of encultured humanity, is not established with the baptism of the son but must wait

until the father takes the plunge. As he does so, his skin colour turns from black to white, an expressive and racist image for his entry into the paternal order, here identified with the Christian regime and the colouring of northern Europeans. The Sultan's insertion into patriliney is confirmed as he gains not only a son but also a father: the King of Tars, his father-in-law (the relationship is more obviously symbolic for being divorced from the biological), with whom he promptly embarks on a crusade against his own people, and whose name and honour he may perhaps have inherited in the lost ending of the Auchinleck version.¹⁸ Such a conclusion would match what we have seen in the text; the title borne by both men and by the poem itself, and which indicates a patrilineage stretching into past and future, would be a fictional approximation to what Lacan in slightly later work terms the Name-of-the-Father.

This latter concept builds on that of the (lower-case, unhyphenated) name of the father, discussed above, but adds a transcendental dimension typical of the development of Lacan's thinking from the later 1950s onwards: 'The attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father.'¹⁹ The *Nom-du-Père* points to a transcendental source for paternal authority, which source Lacan calls the symbolic Father. According to Lacan, no actual father can attain to the transcendent status of the symbolic Father; any individual will necessarily fall short of the ideal. Nevertheless, the human institution of paternity relies on the supposed existence of someone, somewhere, who can properly assume the role, and thus the symbolic Father provides an 'alibi éternel' on which all actual fathers depend.²⁰ The Auchinleck redaction of *KT* identifies the Christian God as the symbolic Father, making him the sole and all-powerful guarantor of paternity. Procreation cannot be attributed to the man who does not acknowledge this God as fatherhood's eternal alibi, and an individual father can only accede to the capacities and rights of paternity insofar as he is a channel for the Name-of-the-Christian-Father – which the Sultan before his conversion clearly is not. After the christening at which he takes the name of his priestly godfather, his former inadequacy is transformed into a capability which enhances the very name of father, as he imposes his authority in both the domestic and the political spheres.

According to Lacan, however, the claim by any named individual to exercise the paternal function fully could only be made within the order called the imaginary.²¹ Lacan's repeated assertion that the

position of the symbolic Father cannot be filled without losing the very symbolic status which is its essence highlights the political agenda served by *KT*'s identification of the Christian God with the transcendent Father. However, Lacan does allow that earthly fathers, denied the inaccessible, may perform limited paternal functions, albeit with varying degrees of inadequacy. But *KT* eschews problematic degrees of competence and unattainable symbolic essence in favour of an uncompromising choice between accessible states of respectively, exclusion from and glorious fulfilment of the paternal role. In *KT*'s stark schema the lump-child represents not some naive popular belief that certain historical peoples could literally not procreate, but the ideological contention that non-Christians are incapable of exercising the paternal function. And without symbolic paternity human beings cannot reproduce, in the sense that they cannot pass on the cultural qualities that distinguish people from animals. Therefore *KT*, like the analogues, makes the father responsible for the child's monstrosity. Whereas in those versions his heathen presence imprinted itself as physical irregularity, in the Middle English romance his religion is interpreted as a symbolic absence which leaves his child fatherless, unable to take the crucial step from maternal flesh to paternal body.

A possible objection to this argument is that paternal failure is not restricted to the heathen Sultan. The Christian King of Tars also fails to impose sexual prohibition and patrilineal filiation, since he cannot prevent the marriage between his daughter and the Sultan. His military defeat and the slaughter of his army confirm his impotence in the face of the Sultan's inhuman onslaught. White Christians are identified as bearers of the entire paternal function only after the redemption of the potentially lost soul has made fully manifest the power of the Christian God, and this delay emphasises the dependence of their potency on his. Initially, however, the Christian father shows the same inadequacy as will the heathen.

This inadequacy has a doctrinal function, for into the breach steps the Princess. The text's exemplar of humility and Christian fortitude, the Princess plays a crucial mediating role as the material and moral means by which Christ gains entry into the earthly world of the narrative. Overwhelmed with 'sorwe & wo' (265) at the spectacle of so many deaths, she affirms her innocence of the blood spilt for her by taking charge of the situation in the only way open to her, and persuades her parents to allow her to marry the Sultan. This is the first of three pivotal acts, individually necessary but only together securing the final release from heathendom in a consummation which will

unite father, son and mother under the sign of Christian paternity. The second redeems the son, and here too the Princess is a key figure. She it is who has borne the lump-child, she who now directs the Christian priest:

For purth pine help in þis stounde
We schul make Cristen men of houndes.
God graunt it zif it be his wille. (742-4)²²

The third act is the Sultan's conversion, achieved after the Princess withholds paternal status from him until baptism, in the speech quoted earlier. The Princess's role in ushering in the Christian-paternal order recalls that of the Virgin Mary, and this connection enhances our understanding of the *flesche* associated with her. From the thirteenth century onwards, medieval theology and piety concentrated increasingly on Christ's carnal nature rather than on his divinity. Christ's humanity itself became sacred, and depended centrally on his physical existence. According to Bynum, the focus of piety was not only Christ's body, but his 'fertile and vulnerable' flesh and blood.²³ This flesh and blood, already associated metonymically and metaphorically with femininity, were considered to derive from his only human parent, herself the product of the Immaculate Conception. A double revaluation thus took place. The flesh acquired a value different from that which it was often accorded in earlier Christianity; no longer interpretable only as the home of sin and decay, it was also the stuff of Christ's Incarnation. The Virgin Mary too gained new importance both as a human and as a mother. Her maternity, if not her womanhood, revered as the source of Christ's sacred humanity, she was lauded as a necessary though not sufficient condition of the salvation Christ offers. Her role was considered analogous to that of a priest, for it was she who first brought Christ's flesh and blood to the congregation; in *KT*, the Princess brings in the priest who will officiate over the conversion of the heathen.²⁴ This conversion not only extends the Christian faith, but brings paternal potency into the text, empowering both King and Sultan. Where the father is lacking, it is the mother who introduces the paternal regime.

A central agent of the Christian-paternal order, the Princess is still allotted a limited role in that order as provider of raw human material, waiting on intervention by God and a Christian husband. So much is orthodox. However, she is not wholly absorbed into the cultural model of the Virgin Mary. The lump she produces presents a graphic

image of what her maternity would be if it could exist outside the symbolic order; its compelling and repellent qualities are those she would own if not under paternal control. Unacceptable at both the personal and the cultural levels, it is figuratively associated with a heathenism conceived as absence from the divine Father. Maternal *flesche* is in this narrative not only the necessary support of the symbolic body but also dramatically other to it. Despite the Princess's centrality, her Christian faith and her energetic and submissive service, an elemental quality she owns as a mother remains alien to the Christian-paternal regime. Its radical indeterminacy, translated into culturally intelligible terms, opens her figure to dual and equivocal interpretation.

I have been treating *KT* on the basis of one manuscript, the Auchinleck. The Vernon and Simeon texts, which strongly resemble each other, are still less discussed.²⁵ Crucially, the lump to which the Princess gives birth is treated differently in the Auchinleck and Vernon versions. Therefore the texts' political and aesthetic systems, constructed as they are around that central (missing) point, are also different. The final section of this essay examines how paternity and maternity are configured in the Vernon redaction. Quite another poem emerges from this later manuscript, in some respects in polar opposition to Auchinleck and certainly prompting re-interpretation of the tale.

Instead of referring to the lump as 'þe flesche', Vernon calls it 'child', 'hit' or, on one occasion, 'þat wrecche' (V, 710). Thus the later redaction lacks the strict terminological distinction drawn by the earlier between the lump before its insertion into human relations through the patriarchal order and the child after baptism gives it a place within that order. This is not mere imprecision, however, but part of the distinct thematic structure which Vernon weaves. The alteration contributes to a change in the portrayal of the Sultan. In Auchinleck he stands out as the only character to refer to the lump as a child, 'þis litel faunt' who is 'lorn' (A, 599). These wistful references only reveal his lack of understanding of the symbolic situation, in contrast to the Princess whose unsentimental and precise terminology underlines her accurate perception of the causes of and remedies for the lump's inhumanity. In Auchinleck the Sultan's sorrow can afford the audience some outlet for any painful feelings the compelling image of the lump-child may arouse, but identification with him is disavowed in favour of that with the crisper and more energetic Princess. She sees through her grief to seize the opportunity for ideological confrontation, and in her emotional muscularity she exemplifies the subordination of sentiment

to doctrine which befits a Christian heroine. In Vernon, however, the Sultan's grief transmits itself directly to the audience. There is a genuinely touching quality in the scene which follows the Sultan's destruction of his idols:

Whon þei weore beten ful good won,
þe child lay stille as eny ston
 Vppon his auteere.
þe child he tok vp sone anon
In to his chaumbre he gan gon
 & seide: 'Dame, haue hit here;
Ichaue i-don al þat i con,
To don hit formen after mon
 Wiþ beodes and wiþ preyere;
To alle my goddes ich haue bi-souht,
Non of hem con helpe hit nouht,
 þe deuel set hem on fuyre!' (V, 619–30)

This quality is lacking in Auchinleck:

& when he hadde beten hem gode won,
Ȝete lay þe flesche stille so ston
 An heye on his auter.
He tok it in his hond anon,
& into chaumber he gan gon,
 & seyð, 'Lo, haue it here.
Ich haue don al þat y can
To make it fourmed after a man
 Wiþ kneleing & preier.
& for alle þat ichaue hem bisouȝt
Mine godes no may help me nouȝt.
 þe deuel hem sette afere!' (A, 661–72)

Subtle changes effect a major overall shift. In Vernon the child is a helpless would-be subject of divine help (V, 629), whereas in Auchinleck it has no such status (A, 671). The pathos of Vernon lines 619–21 replaces the irony of the Auchinleck scene, where the lump's mocking refusal to respond makes it less the victim than the ally of the idols, like them an uncannily resisting representative of the material world. In each version the futility of the father's activity is emphasised, but the repeated use of the word *child* in Vernon vindicates the Sultan's

emotions of grief, powerlessness and inadequacy. One major effect of this is to highlight and authorise those emotions which Auchinleck subordinates to didacticism by restricting them to the Sultan as symptoms of his limited insight. Vernon presents the Sultan's feelings in such a way that they appear representative and even exemplary, worthy of being shared by the audience.²⁶

In Vernon's reworking, the Sultan accedes to the status of father before his christening, but earthly paternity is much more distant from the divine prototype on which it depends. Perceiving the lump as a child makes him a father, the one designation validating the other in a way unacceptable to Auchinleck. His sorrow recalls that of the King of Tars himself when, at the beginning of the poem, he too loses a child, the Princess whom he cannot protect against her ravisher. In Auchinleck the losses suffered by the Christian and heathen fathers are contrasted. The extreme grief of the Christian parents, rendered vividly and at length, attracts our sympathy (A, 325–6, 349–72), while the Sultan's emotions are given short and somewhat bathetic shrift to minimise the impress of fatherhood:

Off he kneled & oft he ros,
& crid so long til he was hos;
& al he tint his while. (A, 634–6)

Audiences of Vernon are encouraged to sympathise with both fathers and not, as in Auchinleck, to identify with one alone. It lessens the Christian parents' expression of grief, and adds lines describing their resignation to God's will:

Pei seze, hit mihte non oþer go;
þe kyng and þe qwene also,
Pei custe heore douhter þare,
Bi-tauzten hire god for euer mo;
Hem self azeyn þei tornede þo,
Of blisse þei weore al bare. (V, 337–42)

What is lacking in the Sultan's response is not the depth of feeling which Auchinleck allows only to the true (because Christian) parent, but the comfort afforded by a trust in providence. The fathers' emotions are comparable; the contrast now concerns the consolation available to each. Moreover, because both his love for the child he has begotten and his sense of failing that child are instrumental in the Sultan's moral

preparation for conversion, the role of biological fatherhood as a stage in the progress towards that conversion is underscored. The link between physical and symbolic fatherhood, emphatically denied in Auchinleck, is restored in Vernon. On the one hand, this means that the heathen realm is no longer opposed to the Christian as, respectively, exclusion from and fulfilment of paternity. Vernon lacks Auchinleck's presentation of a biological father cut off from the Nom-du-Père. On the other hand, in Vernon mortal fatherhood seems to be further removed from its all-powerful divine prototype than is the case in Auchinleck. A degree of failure and frustration appears to be the lot of the human father, whatever his religion. Instead of investing Christian fathers with full paternal powers as Auchinleck ultimately does, Vernon takes the birth of a child as initiating its father into a consciousness of powerlessness and inadequacy which the poem presents, as does Lacan, as the universal condition of paternity on earth; though appreciation of that condition's spiritual meaning, and therefore a measure of reconciliation, remains a privilege open only to Christians. Thus Vernon situates itself differently from Auchinleck in relation to what Lacan calls the symbolic and the imaginary orders. The later redaction retains the imaginary identification of the Christian God as Father found in the earlier version, but allots to Christian (as to heathen) fathers a more symbolic – because frustrated and defective – status. Thus the division between symbolic and imaginary orders is relocated, shifting from a Christian-heathen axis to an earthly-heavenly one.

Turning now to how maternity is altered by Vernon's treatment of the lump: a further consequence of the poet's decision not to refer to it as *pe flesche* is that the maternal associations the term carries in Auchinleck disappear. Paganism remains animal as well as mineral in Vernon, for this version also contains many references to the heathen as beasts.²⁷ The idea that pagan inhumanity can be represented by brute maternity, however, is barely if at all implied in Vernon, reinforcing the impression that the lump is its father's child rather than its mother's. Its imperfection is referred predominantly and directly to him, as his vain struggle to perform the paternal function takes centre stage. The text concentrates squarely on the father's responsibility for his child's condition and on his failure in respect of the symbolic order, without diverting attention to the Princess's role in relation to a double-faceted maternity, at once obstacle and means of access to the symbolic. According to the Vernon redaction, the heathen state is deficient in paternity without therefore being more maternal. Whether through choice or because its redactor lacked the necessary education

and eye for theory, Vernon forgoes Auchinleck's rationalisation of the lump in terms of Aristotelian physiology.

In place of Auchinleck's ambiguously valued maternity, Vernon invokes a femininity celebrated for its privileged relation to the symbolic order. Thus Vernon's Princess appeals to St Katherine the learned teacher rather than to Auchinleck's St Martin when convincing her husband that only his conversion will make him the child's father (A, 808; V, 766). The concluding stanza draws the moral:

Pus þe ladi wiþ hire lore
 Brougte hire frendes out of sore
 Þorw Jesu Cristes grace. (V, 1,111–13)

Both versions portray the married woman as helpmeet and insist on an analogy and a compatibility between a successful secular career and spiritual progress, but Vernon consistently presents the female role as teacherly and virginal, whereas Auchinleck sees it more as maternal.²⁸ In the Vernon *KT*, woman helps to lead others towards the truth; her creativity relates not to biology but to culture and spirituality, and it is by acting in those domains that she makes men. Insofar as the Virgin Mary is a model in this redaction, her function of agent in and mediator of man's salvation is considered more under its aspect of transmitting divine (paternal) light to a benighted earth than of introducing a human (maternal) element into the divinity. Female subordination is represented by the circumscribed place of the handmaiden within the symbolic order and not, as in Auchinleck, by an ineradicable association with the abject stuff which both supports and resists that order.

Not that this contradicts the emphasis on marriage as the proper female sphere; each text makes it clear that the Princess would have been morally and generically wrong to have demanded the path of virgin martyrdom at her people's expense, while the greater Christian community within the text is shown ultimately to profit from her marriage just as in hagiography it does from a virgin martyr's death or from a married saint's refusal of worldliness. Although the poem begins with the opposition, familiar from virgin martyrs' lives, between Christ and the pagan suitor, in this case the two turn out to be miraculously compatible, a resolution prefigured in the Princess's erotically charged dream of an aggressive black hound transformed into a white knight who promises her Christ's protection. Her reaction to this dream is intense, physical and, in Auchinleck, ambivalent:

& when þe maiden was awaked,
For drede of þat wel sore sche quaked
 For loue of her sweuening.
On hir bed sche sat al naked,
To Ihesu hir preier sche maked,
 Al miztful heuen king:
As wis as he hir dere bouzt
Of þat sweuening, in slepe sche pouzt,
 Schuld turn to gode ending. (A, 457–65)

In Auchinleck's version, the Princess responds to both the fearsome and the erotic qualities of the dream that prefigures her own trials in a heathen land and her bridegroom's metamorphosis in the font. Her desire fits thematically with the poem's emphasis on marriage as a pious woman's vocation, yet it also exceeds that.²⁹ Aroused by a mixture of cruelty and tenderness and by a cultural disorientation signified by the heathen clothes in which she has been dressed for the Sultan's delectation, the maiden's sensuality seems to relate directly to a heathen and hence outlandish context. Female sexuality is simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed by this association with the exotic other, but it is not wholly denied to the character presented by the text as an exemplary Christian daughter, woman and wife. In this version, domestic submission is supported by a sexual enjoyment which, although not an integral part of the Christian-paternal order, is recognised to function in this case as a positive force for that order. Justified by the Virgin Mary whose mediating role she emulates, Auchinleck's Princess is licensed to exercise her sexuality within her transgressively mixed marriage. The delights of the flesh are redeemed by their association with the eternally immaculate and virginal.³⁰

Vernon's account of the Princess's response to her dream is almost identical to that of Auchinleck except in the opening lines:

Whon þe mayde was awaked,
Hire flesch, i-wis, was al aquaked
 For drede of hire sweuenyng. (V, 427–9)

By the removal of Auchinleck's 'loue' (A, 459) the erotic response is eliminated, the fearful being correspondingly expanded into two lines. Both female sexuality and feminine ambiguity are erased, moves borne out by the rest of the text. The Princess's fear and physical revulsion are consistent with the text's use of virgin role-models, as described

above, and her reaction is perhaps to be read as the proper feminine response to sexuality in any instance. Repulsed rather than responsive *flesch* signifies a vulnerability and distress which the text endorses and encourages even while it commiserates. Whereas the dream's message of a future merging of Christ and her heathen lord affords the Auchinleck lady pleasure and promises future sensual rewards, in Vernon it only makes clear where her unpleasant duty lies. Vernon's Princess must continue with her wedding without the desire accorded to her counterpart in the earlier manuscript. She is unlike St Katherine not only because it is her duty to accept her heathen suitor, but also because she manifests no strong wish for any bridegroom, be it Christ himself. There is no indication in the text that her feelings towards the Sultan change after his conversion. Marriage and its consummation appear to her a painful and frightening ordeal; this is the martyrdom to which she must submit.

Vernon directs towards its heroine a double refusal: she can neither have what she wants nor want what she has. There is to be no enjoyment for her in secular life, but the virago role of the virgin saint is not a licit alternative. These twin prohibitions are reinforced elsewhere in the text. On the religious side, despite the references to Katherine and to the lady's lore, a notable omission from Vernon is the Princess's sermon to the Sultan (A, 841–76) in which she briefly summarises some fundamental points of Christian doctrine. Although the Vernon text advocates an image of femininity which implies that women's exercise of learning is valid when it brings others to Christ, it suppresses the principal scene in which a female character puts that theory into practice.³¹ On the secular side, the Vernon redaction shows dislike for and disapproval of the courtly milieu in which its heroine is forced to live. The tournament with which the Sultan celebrates his wedding is in Vernon gory and unrestrained, in contrast to Auchinleck, where the poet calls it 'a semly siȝt' (A, 535) and distinguishes it stylistically from the accounts of battle which begin and end the narrative.³² What in Auchinleck is favourably rendered as entertaining or socially useful chivalry becomes in Vernon brutal violence, implying that the enjoyment of such pastimes befits neither Christian characters nor Christian audiences. A similar distaste for courtly entertainments is manifest in the treatment of minstrel activity at the wedding, which Auchinleck celebrates in a whole stanza (A, 553–64) omitted from Vernon, where the festivities seem relatively austere.³³ Both manuscripts feature the exotically alien, including heathen violence and feminine sexuality as well as courtly and festive

activities, elements common in romance and contributing significantly to audience enjoyment. But the Auchinleck version allows us to approve of our pleasure as supporting the poem's greater ideological ends. It portrays the heathen court as a repository of values not to be despised, and the Sultan, denied the validated parental anguish of his Vernon counterpart but judged on these different criteria, as a man of some merit; though initially outside the Christian and paternal pale, he is not unworthy of ultimate redemption, while after his baptism his chivalric virtues bring a superior potency to Christian paternity. In short, secular activities are not only compatible with pious pursuits but can cultivate virtues which enhance them.

The Vernon redaction, alert to the moral danger in every worldly action, seeks to diminish both our opportunities for enjoyment and the pleasure we take in that enjoyment; in this version, courtliness is much more distant from godliness and secular life can only be endured, not enjoyed.³⁴ Overall, Vernon gives the impression of simultaneously exploiting the romance form for its popularity and condemning it for its ideology. Auchinleck, by contrast, appears much more comfortable with the status of pulp fiction.

Notes

An earlier version of this article, including a comparison with *Sir Gowther*, was published in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne *et al.* (eds), *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy* (Turnhout, 2000); reproduced by permission of the publisher. I wish to thank my father, Malcolm Gilbert, for imposing form on the chaos this revision originally presented.

- I The Auchinleck manuscript is thought to have been produced around 1330, the Vernon at the end of the fourteenth century. Both can be consulted in facsimile: *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1*, with an introduction by Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London, 1977), and *The Vernon Manuscript: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. Poet. a.1*, with an introduction by A. I. Doyle (Cambridge, 1987). Doyle also describes the manuscript containing the third extant text of *KT*, the Simeon manuscript, London, British Library, Additional MS 22283. Slightly later in date than Vernon, Simeon is closely linked to it, and the texts of *KT* found in each are very similar. On the relation between the two manuscripts, see especially A. I. Doyle, 'The shaping of the Vernon and Simeon manuscript', in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–13 and Robert E. Lewis, 'The relationship of the Vernon and Simeon texts

- of the *Pricke of Conscience*', in Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (eds), *So Meny People Longages and Tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 251–64.
- 2 On the whereabouts of Tars, see Lillian Herlands Hornstein, 'The historical background of *The King of Tars*', *Speculum*, 16 (1941), 404–14 (pp. 405–6).
 - 3 Quotations are from *The King of Tars*, ed. Judith Perryman (Heidelberg, 1980), lines 576–88. Further references to the Auchinleck version will be to Perryman's edition and will be given in the text.
 - 4 Full details are to be found in Lillian Herlands Hornstein, 'New analogues to the *King of Tars*', *Modern Language Review*, 36 (1941), 433–42. Most of the chronicles Hornstein cites relate these events to the date 1299, but it also appears in relation to dates ranging from 1280 to 1338.
 - 5 Hornstein, 'New analogues', p. 434.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 441–2 (p. 442). In another article where she quotes these lines, Hornstein seems from her syntax to understand 'child' as the object of *ederet*, subject of *praeferens* and then object of *ederet* again. The point that this is a somewhat tortuous (although possible) reading was made in private correspondence by Shelagh Sneddon, who proposes the alternative translation I have transmitted above. Compare Lillian Herlands Hornstein, 'A folklore theme in the *King of Tars*', *Philological Quarterly*, 20 (1941), 82–7 (p. 84). The version quoted, which occurs in the Anglo-Latin *Chronicon de Lanercost*, distinguishes itself by its historical context: it relates the birth of Eric II, King of Norway. No justification is given for the monstrous child. Its transformation into the future King Eric is ascribed to St Francis, to whom Eric's father has a special devotion. Franciscan associations are common to a number of the analogues collected by Hornstein. The Lanercost version is also noteworthy for having a double transformation, like *KT*. In adulthood Eric marries an initially reluctant Scottish princess whose influence civilises her adopted country by improving its mores, teaching it French ('Gallicum') and English and improving its institutions.
 - 7 Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill, 1960), pp. 94–5. Hornstein, 'Folklore theme', p. 84, speculates that the variation between these analogues may be accounted for by scribal confusion between the terms *hirsus* (rough, shaggy) and *ursus* (bear), which brought the idea of hairiness into association with that of formless birth, although she also points out that the bear simile might imply formlessness to one redactor but hairiness to another.
 - 8 On stories including accusations against women of adultery or of monstrous or animal birth, see Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York, 1927). Schlauch summarises the story of Hirlanda of Brittany, accused of giving birth to a shapeless and inanimate child (pp. 126–7).
 - 9 Hornstein, 'New analogues', pp. 438–41. Hornstein traces elsewhere some ideas other than the strictly racial which may have contributed to this

account, and identifies some other black-and-white children in medieval literature.

- 10 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, IX. v. 6: 'Mater dicitur, quod exinde efficiatur aliquid; mater enim quasi materia, nam causa pater est' (*Patrologia Latina* vol. 82, col. 354). See also Judith Butler, 'Bodies that matter', in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, 1993), pp. 27–55.
- 11 Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The body of Christ in the later Middle Ages: a reply to Leo Steinberg', in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992), pp. 79–117 (p. 100). A brief and clear description of the male and female roles in Aristotelian, Hippocratic and Galenic theories of conception is given in Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 46–51. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993), has a much more detailed account of the theories in their classical (pp. 19–39) and medieval (pp. 117–30) forms, as well as a description of their transmission to the medieval West (pp. 39–53). Of the authorities Cadden cites, the closest to *KT* is Albertus Magnus (pp. 121, 126–30).
- 12 'Stille as ston' recurs at line 662, after the Sultan has destroyed his idols. When the lump is first introduced, it is described as 'ded as þe ston' (585).
- 13 Alain Boureau, 'The sacrality of one's own body in the Middle Ages', *Yale French Studies*, 86 (1994), 5–17.
- 14 Bynum, 'Body of Christ', opposes the 'paradigmatic male body' as 'the form or quiddity of what we are as humans' (p. 109) to the 'womanly, nurturing flesh' (p. 114). Pages 98–101 provide a succinct account of the associations between the feminine and the flesh.
- 15 The case for distinguishing between the phases of Lacan's thought is eloquently made in the preface to David Macey's *Lacan in Contexts* (London, 1988), pp. ix–xi. Apart from the texts cited below, I have also drawn in my account of the lump on Lacan's seventh seminar, translated as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. with notes by Dennis Porter (London, 1992).
- 16 '[T]oute l'interrogation freudienne se résume à ceci – *Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'être un père?*', Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956–57*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, 1994), p. 204; italics in original. No English translation of this seminar is yet published.
- 17 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis', in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), pp. 30–113 (p. 66). This paper, also known as the Rome discourse, was originally delivered on 18 November 1953.
- 18 Perryman (*KT*, p. 9) calculates that a maximum of 169 lines of the Auchinleck *KT* have been lost, but notes that Pearsall estimates forty to sixty. Auchinleck heads the tale 'þe king of tars', whereas the incipit and explicit found in Vernon and Simeon respectively refer to both the King of Tars and the Sultan of Damascus.

- 19 Lacan, 'On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Sheridan, pp. 179–225 (p. 199). First published 1959.
- 20 *Séminaire IV*, ed. Miller, p. 210.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 276. Whereas the symbolic order is an abstract, mathematical structure, the imaginary is the domain of images, identifications and phenomena. For a helpful account of the three orders (real, imaginary and symbolic), see Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London, 1991), pp. 88–121.
- 22 For line 742, Perryman gives the Vernon and Simeon reading 'pin help and myn'; I have restored the Auchinleck reading. Quotations from the Vernon manuscript refer to F. Krause, 'Kleine Publicationen aus der Auchinleck-hs.', *Englische Studien*, 11 (1888), 1–62; further references will be given in the text.
- 23 Bynum, 'Body of Christ', p. 116, and further: 'As mystics and theologians in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries increasingly emphasised the human body of Christ, that body could be seen both as the paradigmatic male body of Aristotelian physiological theory and as the womanly, nurturing flesh that Christ's holy mother received immaculately from her female forebear', p. 114.
- 24 On the Virgin Mary as priest, see Bynum, 'Body of Christ', pp. 100–1. The Princess is more directly like a priest in Vernon, where she views conversion as her own as well as the priest's task – see note 22, above.
- 25 Karl Reichl analyses in detail the dialect of *KT* in Auchinleck and in Vernon/Simeon and considers the poem's transmission from the earlier to the later manuscripts: 'The King of Tars: language and textual transmission', in Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, pp. 171–86. In her introduction to *KT*, pp. 58–69, Perryman considers the themes of the tale in both Auchinleck and Vernon/Simeon versions, concluding that the latter shows 'a weaker grasp of the ideas' (p. 69). I have used many of Perryman's detailed observations but generally interpret their effect differently.
- 26 The Princess also refers to the lump as 'child' (V, 706), which would be unthinkable in Auchinleck.
- 27 By likening the Sultan to an animal and an insane human, V implies that both are equally improper to the true human.
- 28 For example, Mary is described as 'moder fre' (A, 65) or 'mayden freo' (V, 64).
- 29 Karen A. Winstead demonstrates the use *KT* makes of hagiographic conventions in its representation of marriage: 'Saints, wives, and other "hooly thynges": pious laywomen in Middle English romance', *Chaucer Yearbook*, 2 (1995), 137–54.
- 30 Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150–1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford, 2001), shows how virgin identifications were available and often useful to medieval women living in a wide variety of situations.
- 31 Vernon's removal of the Princess's preaching might imply a redactor

- more sensitised to heresy than is the case in Auchinleck, which could be an effect of the later date. N. F. Blake notes the orthodox nature of the Vernon texts as a whole and suggests that 'the onset of the Lollard heresy may have prompted someone to prepare a collection that was free of heresy for those who might not so easily be able to judge those things for themselves, such as women religious'; 'Vernon manuscript: contents and organisation', in Pearsall (ed.), *Studies*, pp. 45–59. It has often been suggested that Vernon's original audience was female; certainly pious femininity is a major theme of the collection. A. S. G. Edwards argues that 'medieval compilers were clearly conscious of [KT's] place among Biblical narratives emphasising the power of pious women as agents of Divine power'; 'The contexts of the Vernon romances', in Pearsall (ed.), *Studies*, pp. 159–70 (p. 168). Edwards notes, however, that although in Auchinleck and Simeon *KT* is grouped with other texts focusing on the lives of holy women, Vernon lacks this arrangement. On the other hand, Winstead warns against the presumption of a female audience or patrons on such grounds. Observing that the three *Canterbury Tales* which concentrate on what she calls "'martyred" laywomen' are told by and elicit commentary only from male characters, she proposes that Chaucer's presentation of these tales 'raises ... questions about the motives and prejudices of the people who tell secularised saints' lives'; 'Saints, wives', p. 150.
- 32 Perryman, *KT*, p. 66. Edwards notes the predominance of devotional over chivalric themes in *KT* as in *Robert of Sicily* and *Joseph of Arimathea*, the other two romances contained in Vernon ('Contexts', pp. 159–61).
- 33 Also cut is a stanza near the beginning (A, 289–300) in which the Sultan is seen behaving with princely generosity towards the messengers who tell him of the Princess's capitulation. In my view, Vernon's omissions relate more to disapproval of the esteem in which courtliness is held than to a condemnation of the Sultan, although this sometimes takes the form of reminding us that he is a heathen, as where the knights he sends to fetch the Princess in Auchinleck (316) become 'Sarazins' in Vernon (298).
- 34 Perryman argues for a different approach to the story in the two versions: 'The MSS VS redactor seems to have viewed the tale not as an entertaining diversion [as did the Auchinleck redactor] but as history', *KT*, p. 64. There has been substantial critical discussion of *KT*'s mixture of lay and religious elements. For a useful summary of discussions relating to genre, see Reichl, 'The King of Tars', pp. 171–2. Dieter Mehl points out that *KT* appears in Auchinleck among the exemplary rather than romance texts; *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968), p. 122. S. S. Hussey gives a nuanced analysis of the balance of interest in the contemplative and the mixed lives shown by the texts found in part IV of Vernon (*KT* appears in part III); 'Implications of choice and arrangement of texts in part 4', in Pearsall (ed.), *Studies*, 61–74.