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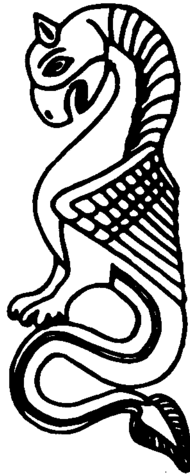

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Honour, Humour, and Women in the Romance of *Yder*

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Introduction

This article examines the Arthurian *Romanz du reis Yder*, to shed light upon an apparently misogynistic passage: the hero kicks a lady who is trying to seduce him.[2] It contextualises the incident with an examination of humour in the romance and examples from other texts which could be considered comparable. In order to examine the role of this lady, it sketches that of every woman in the story to show how each is important to the plot, developing a more general understanding of attitudes to women in the romance. The lady's actions, which facilitate a key plot development at the beginning of the romance, are seen as dishonourable and therefore comic by the other characters. This could modify any suspicion that the poet's view is anti-feminist *per se*, because the theme of honour and dishonour is central to the whole romance. The analysis of the text's humour presented here aims at an understanding, and enjoyment, of how humour is used in *Yder*, providing an aid to interpreting a rather disturbing passage. As far as I can discover, nobody has looked at the treatment of Ivenant's wife in *Yder* by comparing it with the treatment of women in the anti-feminist fabliaux. This comparison, together with discussion of the attempted seduction of Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and a look at another English 'anti-feminist' Gawain romance, concludes the article.

Yder and its context.

Little work has been devoted to *Yder*, and as far as I can discover, nobody has looked at humour or antifeminism in *Yder* at all, let alone studied this episode of kicking the lady in any

[1] Thanks are due to members of the Oxford Anglo-Norman Reading Group, whose discussions of *Yder* fostered my interest in this romance. Further thanks are due to colleagues whose sensitive reading has helped the shaping of this article.

[2] Citations in this article are from *The Romance of Yder*, ed. and trans. by Alison Adams (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), with any alternative readings from *Le Romanz du reis Yder*, ed. and trans. by Jacques Ch. Lemaire (Brussels: Editions Modulaires Européennes, 2010) in brackets or added in my text. Lemaire's edition is more recent, and has been considered better than Adams's (see for example Keith Busby, review of *Le Roman du reis Yder*, ed. by Jacques C. Lemaire, *The Modern Language Review*, 107 (2012), 1250–51). But Adams is easier to use for English readers because Lemaire's translation and notes are in modern French. Every citation has been checked against both versions.

detail. The romance was omitted from Dean's *Anglo-Norman Literature*,[3] but may arguably be considered Anglo-Norman. Dean's criteria for selecting works for inclusion were to do with the provenance of manuscripts and the subject-matter of the texts. The single copy of *Yder* is insular, and the story takes place in Britain rather than in Continental France; therefore it could reasonably have been included.[4] The manuscript, Cambridge CUL Ee. 4. 26, is believed to be Anglo-Norman and from the second half of the thirteenth century;[5] as noted above, it lacks the beginning of the story. The romance may have originated in the western part of mainland France, around the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth. Recurrent dialect features identify the scribe's dialect as Anglo-Norman. We lack the first part of the romance, the single manuscript copy being acephalous. Although the events therein can be deduced from the following narrative, we can only guess at the writer's style in the missing part or what narratorial comments might have been included.

The hero Yder appears here and there across medieval literature, from William of Malmesbury to *Claris et Laris*.[6] But studies of *Yder* are few, compared to many other romances. The International Arthurian Society's *Bibliographical Bulletin* shows a currently low level of interest. The entry for Yder in the *Dictionary of Medieval Heroes* says that although he is the leading character in one romance his fame was too small to inspire later writers or visual artists; it lists only three studies.[7] Further investigation has turned up only a short piece on 'Geography in *Yder*' by A. H. W. Smith.[8]

In spite of *Yder*'s comparative obscurity, reviews of Adams's edition and translation were broadly welcoming when it appeared. Tony Hunt calls it a careful and useful edition of a 'delightful text'.[9] Gilles Roques remarks that the introduction of this 'elegant volume' insists on 'l'humour contenu dans quelques passages'.[10] A. J. Holden confesses a liking for this unusual and interesting romance, remarking on its 'tendances satiriques et sarcastiques'.[11]

There has, however, been some debate about the date and place of *Yder*'s composition. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann argues that, because the figure of Arthur is shown to be weak and unsympathetic, the romance must have been written during the reign of the unpopular King John; and she says the writer's anti-clerical views are evidence that it was written at the abbey of Glastonbury.[12] This account has been found unconvincing. Holden considers that the efforts made to attach the romance to particular historical circumstances are 'parfaitement gratuites'.[13] Both M. Jacques Charles Lemaire, *Yder*'s most recent editor, and Linda Gowans

3 Ruth Dean, with Maureen Boulton, Anglo-Norman Text Society, o. p. 3 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999).

4 See below, and Tony Hunt's review of Dean in *Medium Ævum*, 70 (2001), 340–43.

5 The following notes in this paragraph are from Adams's introduction (pp. 1–7).

6 See Lemaire, pp. 7–8.

7 Willem P. Gerritsen and Anthony G. van Melle, *A Dictionary of Medieval Heroes: Characters in Medieval Narrative Traditions and their Afterlife in Literature, Theatre, and the Visual Arts*, trans. by Tanis Guest, repr. (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000 [first publ. 1998]); the entry for *Yder* is pp. 299–302.

8 *Ceridwen's Cauldron* (Michaelmas 2000 to Hilary 2001), 12–15.

9 Tony Hunt, review of *Chrétien de Troyes and the Troubadours: Essays in Memory of the Late Leslie Topsfield*, ed. by Peter S. Noble and Linda M. Paterson, *The Modern Language Review*, 80 (1985), 932–33, judges there is no firm philological evidence for Schmolke-Hasselmann's thesis (see below).

10 Review of *The Romance of Yder*, ed. and trans. by Alison Adams, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 100 (1984), 712–13.

11 Review of *The Romance of Yder*, ed. and trans. by Alison Adams, *Romania*, 107 (1986), 130–35 (p. 130).

12 Schmolke-Hasselmann, 'King Arthur as Villain in the Thirteenth-century Romance *Yder*', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 6 (1980), 31–43.

13 Holden, p. 130. He is referring to Schmolke-Hasselmann's arguments about the romance's date and place of

have expressed their reservations about Schmolke-Hasselmann's conclusions.[14] Evidence to question Schmolke-Hasselmann's arguments further is set out here and in the pages below. My purpose in challenging her argument is not to offer alternative opinions about the romance's provenance, but to demonstrate that her arguments have distracted readers' attention from what two important themes of the romance are really intended to achieve: the anti-monastic satire is part of the poet's comic purpose throughout, and the portrait of an unsatisfactory king is part of the poet's overall critique of dishonourable behaviour.

Satire, directed at the pursuit of wealth and the worldly life, is identified by Adams in two passages: general satire at 1678–745, and of monks specifically at 3681–717. Although anti-clerical satire is one of the humorous elements of the romance, and therefore of interest to my argument, it is no indication of the romance's source. Satire on monastic life is a medieval commonplace, therefore it is hardly likely to help us locate the composition of the romance.[15] The setting is England, and one of Dean's criteria for including texts in the Anglo-Norman canon is that their matter should be insular. However, as Smith points out, an abbey, identified as Glastonbury by scholars, is shown in the romance to be a house of entirely benevolent nuns; this weakens Schmolke-Hasselmann's argument that it must have been written at Glastonbury or that it satirizes the monks there.[16]

Schmolke-Hasselmann also argues that the despicable Arthur is modelled on King John, thus aiming to date the romance rather precisely. Arthur's behaviour is directly responsible for the main thrust of the romance's plot: he is the most important of the characters who behave dishonourably, even though he is not mocked as the seductive lady is. It must be stressed, however, that the theme of a king behaving badly is not unusual in romance. In *Four Sonnes of Aymon*, Charlemagne behaves atrociously because of the needs of the plot.[17] In the *lai* of *Lanval* the king is 'inadequate'; Lemaire notes other negative characterizations of Arthur, and of Charlemagne, and is not convinced by Schmolke-Hasselmann's arguments.[18] A recent article by Elizabeth Archibald, on the *Historia Meriadoci*, discusses the topos of Arthur as an unsatisfactory king, but does not insist that the romance must therefore have been written in the time of King John.[19] Rather, she suggests that it may be reflecting Welsh traditions in which Arthur is not always an idealized king. This could equally be true of *Yder*, so other factors (than an unsatisfactory king) must be sought if one wished to research *Yder*'s sources. Meanwhile, for the figure of King John as model for an unsatisfactory Arthur, Lemaire points out that his groundless jealousy in *Yder* hardly matches what is known about the real monarch John. Arthur is forgetful (John may have been so), and murderously jealous (not something

composition. If it was written in Western France, as suggested by Adams (see p. 17, above), one does ask oneself whether King John was as unpopular there as he is supposed to have been in England.

14 M. Jacques Charles Lemaire, 'Originalités thématiques et textuelles du *Romanz du reis Yder* (circa 1210): Communication de M. Jacques Charles Lemaire à la séance mensuelle du 12 décembre 2009', *Le Bulletin de l'Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique*, 87 (2009), 195–211; Linda Gowans, *Cei and the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 104–7 and, especially, p. 182 fn 11.

15 Adams pp. 11–13.

16 Smith, 'Geography in *Yder*'.

17 See for example *The Right Plesaunt and Goodly Historie of the Foure Sonnes of Aymon. Englisht from the French by William Caxton*, ed. by Octavia Richardson, in *The English Charlemagne Romances*, Early English Text Society, extra series 34–41, 43–45, 50 (London: Trübner, 1879–87), parts X–XI.

18 Lemaire, *Le Romanz*, pp. 11–15.

19 'Variations on Romance Themes in the *Historia Meriadoci*', *Journal of the International Arthurian Society*, 2 (2014), 3–19.

John was notorious for). Therefore, even if John was generally unpopular, it is unlikely that *Yder* was written specifically as an anti-monarchical polemic.

Adams has much to say about the *Yder* poet's sense of humour, a topic of fundamental importance to this article. She points especially to the episode of the lady, Ivenant's wife, in which everybody laughs at the lady's failure to seduce the hero; she also points to the slapstick tug-of-war over a horse (2308–19). She notes a down-to-earth attitude that debunks any suggestion of the marvellous: a bear that Yder has to deal with in the queen's chamber is not wild but has merely escaped from its handlers. Further, the miraculous cure of Yder, after he has been poisoned by Kei towards the end of the romance, is effected not by magic but by an emetic. Arthur is not portrayed as specially funny, although several other characters (especially Kei) are roundly mocked.[20] The mocking of Kei parallels the mocking of the seductive lady.

The notorious incident of the lady who tries to seduce the hero is picked out by Adams as comic. It may be thought, at first reading, to resemble a very important incident in a more famous romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,[21] in which the lady succeeds only in eliciting kisses and persuading the hero to accept her girdle (to be discussed further below). The episode of the seductive lady in *Yder* could be seen as distasteful: in order to escape her attentions, Yder kicks her in the stomach. This seems to go directly against the knightly code of good behaviour towards women, and is brutally violent. However misogynistic this punishment of a woman may seem, there are numerous passages about women in *Yder* that show them all to be strong and decisive ladies whose actions, and words, are important to the plot. Given that there are divergent ways of reading the episode, in the context of other women in the romance, I deemed that an article about these women, and the comedy that colours one of them, might be an acceptable addition to *Yder* studies.

Women in *Yder*

Yder proves himself fit to be dubbed as knight by kicking a lady, wife of King Ivenant, hard in the stomach. At the beginning of the romance as it survives, while Yder is visiting Ivenant's court, Ivenant warns the hero that he will be tested by his wife's attempt to seduce him (at 202–10); this test has in the past been the downfall of other aspiring young men, and the courtiers are all aware of the situation. Before Yder first meets her, Ivenant jokes about her naughty tricks. This joking on the part of her husband underlines both the importance of the episode and the importance of humour for interpreting the poem. Ivenant's wife appears (at 260), together with her maid and an old woman. After the maid's enthusiastic description of the fine young stranger, the lady goes to look at Yder for herself (315). The pair then discuss who ought properly, because of rank, to love whom. Yder resists her advances energetically, and kicks her in the stomach (374–80):

[20] Adams, pp. 19–24.

[21] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. A. Burrow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972). A parallel with the Joseph and Potiphar's wife story from the Old Testament, in which a lady tempts the young man and cries rape when she is repulsed, is adduced by Jana Lyn Gill, 'Gawain's Girdle and Joseph's Garment: Tokens of "Vntrawþe" ', *Journal of the International Arthurian Society*, 2 (2014) 46–62, but the story is so common as to be referred to familiarly as 'the badger game' among medievalists; it also appears in Classical literature (for example, the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus). Neither of ladies in question, either in *SGGK* or in *Yder*, cries rape.

> Quanque il puet se treit ariere,
> Més ele se treit tot dis soentre.
> Yder la fiert del pié al ventre,
> Si qu'el cheï ariere enverse
> E qu'el en devint tote perse.
> Jo nel sai pas de ça reprendre,
> Kar il ne se poeit defendre.
>
> Yder pulled away as best he could, but she kept moving closer. So he kicked her in the stomach, so that she fell back and turned pale. I can't blame him for that, because there was nothing else he could do to defend himself.

People overhearing the scene laugh heartily, as if all this is a well-known joke. By his resistance, Yder shows himself worthy to be made a knight. However, he promises the lady that he will speak to her before he leaves; he keeps his promise by shouting to her rather than going into her room.

The romance contains three queens: Guinevere, Guenloie, and this lady who is the wife of King Ivenant and thus also a queen. We are not told what her name is, even though she is such a prominent character. Her anonymity could be seen as distinguishing: she differs from the other queens by her bad behaviour, which is set up and exploited by the poet. Apart from the bear which appears later, this disgraceful incident is the only thing that many of its readers can remember about the romance. These female figures call for close attention: because they are all important to the plot, the episode of this lady is no isolated anti-feminist passage. I argue that her importance is in her comic role: the romance's pervasive humour and joking quickly stand out as characteristic. Humour's part in the romance is to underline what the poet has to say about honour and dishonour, especially as embodied in the episode under discussion.

The episode in which Yder kicks the lady is comedy. Yder is justified because the lady's behaviour is dishonourable, and she becomes the butt of everybody's mirth. The king warns Yder about what is going to happen, but although he explains that it is a joke for him (the king), he has not instructed his wife to behave like this (see esp. 203–8). It is paralleled by episodes in which Kei, the king's favourite, likewise behaves dishonourably; he is frequently a laughing-stock in spite of the fact that he nearly kills Yder twice. Because neither he nor the seductive lady succeeds, the comedy remains comic throughout the romance. Neither the narratorial voice nor any character spouts forth the usual outburst of complaint at women's faithlessness and frailty that is found in anti-feminist passages elsewhere. The nearest to anti-feminist sentiment among the characters occurs in only one passage: Arthur remarks that women resort to grief as a vengeance (6292), but that men ought not to do so. But his is an untrustworthy voice for such sentiments; this speech is placed in the mouth of somebody whom we know to be unsympathetic and unpleasant, late in the romance, so that we are not at all inclined to believe him. The writer as narrator betrays no misogynistic tendency anywhere else, and shows misogyny as a vice in the person of Arthur.

The reaction of characters in *Yder* is to regard what happens to the lady as comic, and to laugh heartily. Why would this be? I argue that it is because the story is about honour and dishonour, with emphasis on the destructiveness of jealousy. Arthur's jealousy nearly destroys the hero; Kei is mocked for envy and for dishonourable behaviour. If anything, the lady achieves a kind of parity with an important male character, in that she too is the butt of amusement when she behaves badly. If this is anti-feminism, it is of a very unusual kind.

Before exploring the failed seduction attempt by Ivenant's wife further, I now set out an account of each female figure of the story in order of appearance: what they have to say, and how they behave. This analysis attempts to set that lady's unusual role into the context of other women in the story, whose roles are more traditional for a narrative of this kind.

Their importance is marked in a number of ways: many are given direct speech, or are shown taking part equally in conversations with men. Their feelings are usually described sympathetically; some are shown making jokes. Some are shown to be powerful in their own right, and they all play a crucial part in the plot. Listing them in this way allows readers to review the female figures one after another, removing any necessity to group them in order of importance.

i) The Maidens' Castle damsel (70–122) addresses Arthur very confidently, using the familiar 'tu',[22] and she is furious at Arthur's refusal to help her mistress against her attacker, in spite of his earlier promises to the lady. Arthur explains that he wants to defeat the knight Talac de Rougement first. This sets the scene for the king's untrustworthiness and its ensuing consequences. Later, when the situation has changed, Arthur says he will not help Talac until after he has defeated that same Black Knight who besieges the same 'orgoillose pucele' of Maidens' Castle (3485). The latter never appears in person, but she is important because she is among the female characters who advance the plot.

ii) Ivenant's wife, whose encounter with Yder I have described above.

iii) A key development in Yder's story is his acquistition of a squire, Luguain. Luguain's mother is first mentioned at 576. The family is poor but generous; she gives Yder her own cloak because there is no other in the house. Luguain had warned her that a lot of people were coming to visit, but in fact Yder comes alone. She longs to be able to entertain lavishly, as is honourable. Luguain's parents discuss his future, worrying what will become of him. Luguain had intended to ask his mother's advice about what to do (722), which indicates her wisdom, although in the end he makes plans with his father.[23] Later there is a welcome given by both parents; the mother gets direct speech (6119). If minor figures are given a voice when it is not strictly necessary for them to have one, it suggests that the writer nevertheless wishes to stress their importance to the plot or to its themes.

iv) Yder's mother. Yder says that he is looking for a knight who seduced a poor girl twenty-five years ago (918). These are, predictably, his own father and mother. She is described as 'a poor girl' again at 4794. At 4911 the knight, Nuc, vows he will marry none but Yder's mother. Yder goes to look for his mother at 6649, also for his grandmother if she is still alive.[24] Yder then arranges the marrriage of his own father and mother, as well as that of Cliges and his lady (who will appear later in the story).

v) Talac's sister (1007), even wiser than she is beautiful, gives Yder a fine cloak. Later she is named Guilladon, and again she is seen giving fine clothes. It is stated that this is no dishonour, because it is for Talac's sake. It is curious that such gift-giving should have

[22] Except for this lady, to Arthur, people use the 'vos' form to one another.

[23] There is a nice leave-taking scene at 892; Luguain is not named until 908.

[24] This late arrival in the story is alive, but we don't see much of her.

to be justified; here, extra talk about a character seems to be a way of underlining her importance.

vi) Guinevere, and her ladies. One of the many who come to watch the fight, at Arthur's siege of Talac's stronghold Rougemont, is Guinevere (1053). At 1495 she praises Yder. At 1873, the watching ladies have given their wimples as pennants to their favourites; they want to know who Yder is. Guinevere tries to stop Yder jousting with the great Gawain (2192); it is a brief but thoughtful conversation, showing that Guinevere is no mere figurehead. Further, by establishing Guinevere as a person of consequence, the poet valorizes her dislike of the dastardly Kei.

Everybody is heart-broken at Yder's wounding by Kei (2338). When Guinevere hears that Yder has recovered, she wants to go with Arthur (3156–61) to fetch him to the Round Table. Arthur is angry that she is praising him (3173), because he is jealous. The narrator suggests that if she asked Yder to stay he might do so; but she tactfully whispers to Gawain to ask him, so that Arthur will not hear or suspect her wish (3247). The bear episode (3301–98), which happens in Guinevere's room, is not explained in the text, but it has become significant for scholars because of Yder's conventional association with a bear. It is possibile that Yder's bear could, in the present romance at least, be an *alter ego* of the jealous and aggressive king himself.[25] The bear, which has escaped the dogs baiting it, tries to attack Guinevere and her company; Yder conquers it and throws it out of the window. Guinevere's messengers include, surprisingly, a daughter of the King of Ireland.[26] She jokes as she summons Gawain, Ywain, and Yder, but we never find out why because of the bear's sudden appearance. There is a long passage where Arthur cross-questions Guinevere, out of jealousy (5136–220). Later he pretends not to know who Yder is; he says 'the one the ladies are so keen on' (5263). Towards the end of the romance Guinevere appears accompanied by knights; it will be seen that Guenloie, by contrast, is accompanied by ladies. This is a nice way of differentiating the two queens.

vii) Guenloie, the lady on whom Yder sets his heart and whom he eventually marries. The ladies surrounding Guinevere are joined by Guenloie (1185), the central female figure of the romance. During an important battle, Guinevere sends a girl to fetch this heroine to her side. Guenloie is afraid she will be unable to recognize Yder, not knowing what arms he wears nor which side he is fighting on. She had first met him during the opening section of the romance, which is lacking, so we have no details of the meeting. She suffers terribly in case he, the one she is looking at, is not Yder. Later, after a long passage about Yder's love-suffering, we are given Guenloie's own thoughts (1754–832), spoken aloud. She raves at length (2532), citing tragic women from antiquity. But she acts positively, giving orders, going to the look-out, in spite of preparing to kill herself out of despair, thinking she will never be united with her lover. Ready to die bravely and alone, she sees Luguain (2662). There follows a long episode with conversation and action; she is strong

[25] E. C. Southward, 'The Knight Yder and the Beowulf Legend in Arthurian Romance', *Medium Ævum*, 15, 1946, 1–47. See Natalia Tikhonov, 'The King, the Goddess and the Bear', *Ceridwen's Cauldron* (Trinity 1998), xix–xxi, for the supposed meaning 'bear' of the name *Arthur*.

[26] Miroet and Kamelin (5840–42), who appear as if miraculously to heal Yder of the poison administered by Kei, are sons of a King of Ireland called Alfred. There may be a connection with this messenger, daughter of an Irish king; if so it is not stated. Perhaps they were on their way to visit their sister when they happened upon the moribund hero.

enough to realise that she can heal Yder. Later she is happy at his cure, and at his honour. She decides to besiege Talac as a way of getting Arthur and his knights, including Yder, to come to her (she has Talac watched, for this purpose).[27] In a conversation between Guenloie and a messenger-girl there is a long description of the battle (reported speech 5005). Guenloie shows her clenched fist to Yder at 5371. This powerful but curious detail is later explained as both an instruction and a gesture of confidence. When she arrives to meet King Arthur towards the end of the romance, with her train of lovely ladies (cf. Guinevere's knights), she sends a messenger to announce herself (6453). She has been discussing her marriage with her anxious barons. Because she is a queen, Yder must be crowned before he can marry her.

viii) The Nuns. There is a central monastic element in the story, as important incidents are set in one or more friendly nunneries. This argues against anti-monastic satire being crucial to identifying the place of the romance's composition.[28] Although the poet complains about monks elsewhere in the text, the nunnery is portrayed as a benevolent and important place; female religious, at least, are not the object of mockery or satire in the romance. Yder gives one prize horse to a convent. And it is a convent or abbey, implicitly the same one, where Luguain takes the wounded Yder after Kei's first attack on him (2878); he gives them Gawain's horse and some money. The hosteler, a lady named Esotil (3003) welcomes them. The doctor, by contrast, is a man; his method is described enthusiastically by the hosteler (3069–93). When Arthur and his party visit to enquire after Yder, the abbess is given a longish speech (3195–213).

Yder is not healed by a woman: Guenloie starts the first healing process, but the convent doctor is male. No woman helps with the later healing, by the sons of Alfred (5837–922). However, women nurture their dead or wounded men in the romance: Guenloie and the nuns help Yder, as explained above; a lady will not abandon her dead lover (below).

ix) The lady with a dead lover. Yder, left behind by his companions, finds this lady, whose lover (set upon and killed by seven assailants) had been one of Talac's men (3583). She is very vocal, and long speeches include talk about the value of confession. Here, a woman is allowed to discuss important matters pertaining to the Church. They go to the house with the dwarf (see next paragraph), where later the lady is given a bed after the events of the evening have been resolved. When Yder leaves, he charges Cliges to see to the body's burial and also to return the lady to her father (4379).

x) The mistress of the house with the dwarf is clever (3899), but Yder tricks her into pleading with her lover for lodging and hospitality (3994). There is some light-hearted play with Yder's name (4072–89). It turns out that the mistress of the house's own lady is Guenloie. The mistress of the house reconciles Yder with her lover, the dwarf's master,[29] whose

[27] This is the first we hear that Guenloie is Arthur's niece (3469); nothing special is made of it but it adds to the lady's status as queen in her own right. When Arthur and his companions meet her on their way to seek adventures (5285) he calls her 'niece' again.

[28] See Schmolke-Hasselmann for this view.

[29] In Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, Yder has an aggressive dwarf of his own. Motifs of this kind are very mobile; although if a really famous attribute such as a named sword were to appear in the wrong hands then the writer responsible would be forced to explain how it got there (presumably because an oral performance of the text in question, if it happened later than the sword's becoming famous in previous romances, would be loudly heckled by the audience).

name is Cliges (4290). He is Guenloie's vassal, although Guenloie took his lands away because of his unwelcome advice to her about love. However, at the end of the romance, on the occasion of his marriage which Yder arranges, she gives him back his lands and more besides. At a later visit to Cliges's house, Yder and the mistress of this house joke together; she is not forgotten (5110) at the leave-taking of Yder and Nuc.

xi) The lady with the plaits, whom Yder finds in Guenloie's tent (at 4464–72), seems to be one of Guenloie's servants. She explains about her nameless suitor, and laughs when the very man appears behind Yder's back (4551). She is able to look on as Yder fights him (4670), so that part of the scene is described as if through her eyes. Thanks to her insistence on discovering Nuc's name, he and Yder are reunited and go off together. She is very happy, and will tell Guenloie about Yder's father (4894).

It will be clear that the women in *Yder* are an active and talkative lot compared to typical female characters in some other romances. Their presence in *Yder* helps to build a romance in which the misogyny found in so many medieval texts is here subordinated to other themes. Significantly, a main theme of *Yder* is the foolish destructiveness of jealousy, especially in men; the poet deals with it by poking fun at this kind of jealousy. The hero and heroine are not guilty of such feelings, but Arthur most certainly is; others, Kei especially, behave badly because of envy.

The romance contains much talk about love and how painful it is; it is tempting to see this as humorous because so very exaggerated. The light-hearted treatment of love itself supports a view that the romance is shot through with humour, even if some of it is rather grim: scenes such as the hero's encounter with Ivenant's wife set the tone for later adventures. Later events include the comic discomfiting of Kei, the jealous knight (detailed below). Witnesses at the royal court laugh at Kei; witnesses at Ivenant's court laugh at this king's wife. Yder is tested, and succeeds, at the beginning of his career. The scene is clearly intended to be funny, at least to everybody in the story, because they laugh uproariously; Ivenant himself warns the hero, quite without any jealousy, as if something hilarious is going to happen to him. The passage in which Ivenant warns Yder does not say that he has instructed his wife to test the hero; rather, he says he knows about her little ways and this situation amuses him immensely: 'Huem ne se puet de lui defendre: | Sa druerie l'i feit prendre | Qu'il ne la prent delivrement […] Jo en faz mon gab, si m'en dedui' (Nobody can defend himself against her: her passion takes hold so that she is left with no choice ... I make a joke of it, and enjoy it (203–8, my translation)).

When she complains that 'he brings me shame for his amusement' (334) she does not mean he has told her to behave like this, only that he sends young men to her and then laughs at the outcome. However unpleasant modern readers may find the episode, it would seem that the lady has taken no harm from being kicked; at least her reply to Yder's parting words seems cheerful enough (457–58). For this later exchange, Yder is careful to keep out of her way while still keeping his promise to speak to her before leaving. No doubt she will try her wiles on the next young man who comes along.

The Romance as Comedy

The theme of humour is well established, and may have been set up at the very beginning of the romance. Light-heartedness is apparent from the start (as we have it), when the king's

huntsman meeting the hero simply cannot believe Yder doesn't know who Arthur is. There is a comic scene, cited above among examples of humour noted by Adams, of knights pulling desperately at a rather annoyed horse; the narrator also chuckles at Gawain's fall (2281–91). This happens immediately before Kei's dastardly attack at 2320–32 ff.

The words and phrases picked out in this section, and the kinds of humour identified, range from narrator's comments through to characters' open laughter. They include everything from gentle fun through to irony and sarcasm, merriment and joking to explicit comic game. The following is an analysis of every example of any kind of humour, reading straight through the romance in order of appearance, because in this way it can be observed how the comic effect builds up. It may be noticed that some of the humour is the kind enjoyed by the characters, some by the narrator, and some intended for the enjoyment of the audience (although it is difficult to gauge how a medieval audience, whose idea of humour might differ from ours, would respond). We are therefore on safer ground if we analyze passages where characters make and enjoy jokes; passages where the narrator is having fun at the characters' expense certainly appear to be intended to amuse the audience.

I have not included examples of word-play in my list because they are so very common in this kind of romance; many sidelong comments from the narrator are likewise very common. All build a picture of a poet enjoying himself at the expense of bad or excessive behaviour. An example of the narrator winking, so to speak, at the audience is his gentle fun at 2071–75: we are told that had Yder wanted a love-affair, now that the ladies were all so admiring of him, he could have had ten!

29 'gabast'. The huntsman thinks Yder is joking when the latter asks who Arthur is; there follows, rather ironically, an encomium of Arthur.

118 'or ad son (il) bon meritement' (see also 114–15). This, meaning 'he's got what he deserves' (in the context of a reported dispute), is sarcasm.

159 'qu'il rient'. Yder gives horses to a young man who is apparently not being helped by Arthur; when he tells his companions they chatter and laugh (merriment), and Arthur is embarrassed when he hears his lack of generosity being reported.

208 'Jo en faz mon gab si m'en dedui'. It is Ivenant's game to send Yder to be tempted by his wife: if Yder loses he will be tonsured like a criminal.[30] There may be a further joke in the line 'La verrez li meistre del chastel' (230), as if Ivenant is pretending his wife is the boss (You'll see the 'master' there).

293–97 The short exchange between Ivenant's lady and her maid is certainly humorous. It is to be noted that the lady is under-dressed, ostensibly because of the heat but obviously in order to look seductive.[31]

334 'honte me feit pur son deduit'. The lady is aware of her husband's amusement, but complains that he is shaming her for his own fun. The narrator, meanwhile, explains that Yder has absolutely no choice but a kick to get out of her clutches.

[30] Lemaire, *Le Romanz*, p. 448 n. to 213, notes that this kind of tonsure was especially applied to adulterers.

[31] The lady in *SGGK* is likewise under-dressed (lines 1740–41).

382–90 These lines are about the amusement throughout Ivenant's household; the lady knows they are all laughing at her (403). It is stressed how cleverly Yder manages not to touch her — at least, not with his hand (418).

465–66 'Li reis s'en rist […] E li chevaliers'. The king and the knights are also amused at how cleverly Yder manages to keep his promise to speak to the lady before leaving — without actually having to see her.[32]

618–24 'tricher … gabé … fausé'. These words close together (trick, joke, fool) suggest a teasing exchange between Luguain and his mother.[33]

1144–66 'fu Quois bon chevaliers | A poi de mos vos a conté | Quanqu'il out en lui bonté …' This is heavily sarcastic, and the narrator goes on to explain just what a bad knight (and bad man) Kei is: that is, he has no good qualities and therefore they can be told in few words. The list of his vices includes envy, and this explains but does not excuse his dreadful behaviour.

1249–55 This is a passage in which Kei is mocked. Because of his disloyalty, the onlookers have no pity when he is beaten.

1278 '... set ke Bedoer le gabe'. Kei knows, in spite of Bedoer's 'reasonable' words, that he is being laughed at. Guinevere emphatically does not like Kei, and laughs after his third fall (1317–24); nor does anybody like him except Arthur (fortunately for Kei, in the circumstances).[34] There is more mockery at 1330–44. This treatment of Kei undermines what looks like a negative portrait of Ivenant's wife: both are being punished for dishonourable behaviour. If the medieval audience laughs at Kei's discomfiture, as well they might because it is refreshing to be allowed to mock a character often portrayed as negative, then they may also have laughed at the importunate lady and her failure to seduce the hero.

2573 'dedire'. Guenloie is on the verge of killing herself, and accuses Love of having fun at her expense. This point is underlined by the narrator's rather sarcastic comment, that the boy sent to fetch a knife for her managed to find one so quickly (2624–27).

2908–12 The narrator remarks with apparent amusement that Luguain addressed the prioress incorrectly.

3026–28 Yder asks Luguain whether he is teasing him, in response to his news.

3166–71 Arthur's expression, and his laugh, are evidence of his felony.[35] Arthur's laugh is at the expense of other characters, and the audience would be more alarmed than amused by such behaviour.

[32] It is thanks to Yder's winning the 'game' that Ivenant agrees to dub him. Note at this point a detail not (to my knowledge) commonly found in romances: the practice of putting one's sword on the altar and then 'buying it back' by means of a donation to the religious house in question.

[33] It was noted earlier that the young man is not named here, but at a later and significant point in the story. Naming is a way of pointing up the important moments of a character's role.

[34] Arthur does admit Kei's bad influence at 2460.

[35] Who will fetch Yder to the Round Table? Adams, according to his note on the line, thinks that line 3165 is the

3238–46 Yder reacts, at first with sarcasm, to the king's invitation to the Round Table.

3313–21 There is a joke about a bishop immediately before the scene with the bear.

3465 Talac will be a laughing-stock if Arthur won't help him.[36]

All this shows the frequency of words and phrases expressing humour. The narrator is clearly enjoying the frequent comic turns of the plot, and portrays the characters reacting light-heartedly to many of them. The audience may be reluctant to laugh directly at a hero's suffering, even if it is portrayed as ludicrous; but they are more likely to laugh against bad characters.

Even the last lines of the poem are a tease: the poet insists repeatedly that the book is not for anybody, for nobody at all, but clergy and noblemen and their ladies. This is a very wide group of people who will enjoy the romance and laugh at or with the characters. Adams's translation of the final couplet ('Ici finist le romanz du reis Yder | Com il esteit bon chevaler') keeps this feeling: 'Here ends the Romance of King Yder and what a fine knight he was'. This makes the narrator sound cheerful and as if amused by the story we have just heard; compare Lemaire's less spirited 'Ici s'acheve le roman du roi Yder qui était un bon chevalier' ('… who was a good knight').

Humour is an important theme or element in the romance, because it underlines what the poet has to say about honour and dishonour. People laugh at Kei just as they laugh at Ivenant's wife: quite simply, both are perceived as behaving dishonourably. In other romances the same figure (Kay, or similarly spelt) behaves badly and is punished by taking a fall or a beating from other characters. In this romance his punishment is public shaming and mockery. Everybody knows the worst about Kei, so the theme is not unexpected, but it is unusual for a woman to be so treated in a romance. Interestingly, in view of *Yder* 's theme of jealousy, Ivenant is not in the least jealous about his wife; he says most knights fail the test, but there is no suggestion that he minds when she succeeds in seducing them. Nobody laughs at Ivenant; this is not a jealous husband! The narrator has much to say about jealousy, including that there is no need to guard a good woman — in fact, it is a stupid thing to do. The passage is intended as a disparaging comment on Arthur's jealousy because Guinevere admires Yder; the narrator goes on to say that a bad woman (presumably Ivenant's wife) brings shame upon herself (5447–78). In fabliaux, however, there is a perceived need to guard women: the good ones in case of male predators, and the bad ones to prevent them preying on males.

There seems to be little irony in the long disquisitions about love that recur several times. Such musing seems to be standard stuff for romances of this type and period. It is treated light-heartedly, however, and it is also remarked that anybody who pursues what is worthwhile may laugh at those who pursue riches (1690–92). There may indeed be a shade of irony when, after one such passage (1633–1746), Yder appears to have had enough … of the narrator going on and on? 'Yder out ja dis bien assez' (1747) begins a new paragraph that describes the hero's suffering, but it could be read as a wry comment by the poet.

narrator wishing he (Gawain?) would leave the subject; Lemaire's commentary interprets the line as part of the queen's speech where she is hoping that Yder is still at the abbey.

[36] This is where Arthur at last resolves to go and help the lady whom he refused to help before (the first of the female characters, above).

Yder's Context, Conclusions

Any text containing apparently hostile attitudes to women immediately invites comparison with the fabliaux, those notoriously misogynistic short stories whose classification or interpretation continues to challenge critics. Here I focus on just two examples of the genre, known as *De l'engin de femme: del velous* ('pulling the wool over his eyes') and *De l'espee: autre engin de femme* ('the sword — more women's trickery').[37] There is no such thing as a typical fabliau, but the two I have chosen show elements which are common in many. In both, the ladies are shown as winning the battle of the sexes, saving the lover from detection and fooling the husband. Of the ladies, the younger needs the help of her crafty mother; the latter is responsible for the trick that saves the situation. Neither woman is mocked. The lover cuts, in both cases, a poor figure; he hides behind the women and is saved by them. The laugh, if there is one, is against only the husband: in both cases he looks foolish for being so easily taken in. Because he is a good man in both these cases (the husband is not portrayed as 'good' in all fabliaux), it is possible to feel sorry for him and to blame the wickedness of women.

Neither the lady in *Yder* nor the lady in *SGGK* fits even remotely into this kind of pattern. For one thing, neither of them 'wins', even though the latter appears to achieve her somewhat mysterious aim when the hero accepts her girdle. For another, neither hero is mocked for being taken in by the lady in question. Yder is not taken in at all; the reaction of characters in the story to Gawain's predicament is hardly mockery, and a modern audience at least would be unlikely to laugh at him. However, although the romance episodes just examined both differ from fabliau situations in the way the women are treated by the writers, they differ from each other in equally important ways.

Any parallel with *SGGK*, as was suggested earlier in this article, is not a very close one. Although the episodes are analogous in their object of testing the hero, they cannot be seen as comparable once we examine them.

Talk with the lady is about love in both stories, but in *SGGK* there is much play about 'which' Gawain it is: the famous warrior known to British romance, or the famous lover notorious in French romance. It is not about rank in the context of love, as it is in *Yder*. The Gawain scenes with the lady take place in comparative privacy, although the kisses are 'handed over' publicly; by contrast, Yder is warned jovially and openly about the wiles of the lady in question, and everybody is gleefully aware of what is going on. The lady in *SGGK* is acting on instructions from her husband and from Morgan le Fay; the lady in *Yder* is acting according to her own devices.Yder touches the lady with a foot (to kick), not with a hand; he certainly does not kiss. Gawain achieves kisses without succumbing further, and also without repulsing the lady.The lady is not mocked by the poet, nor by anybody in the story.

Yder passes the test at the beginning of his career as a knight, and there is no question about his success. Gawain, by contrast, has been a knight for long enough to establish his reputation, and the test is not about his suitability for knighthood. It comes towards the end of the story rather than at the beginning, and it includes the ambiguous girdle as well as kisses. He himself is uncertain about his success, whatever anybody else thinks at the conclusion of the romance. The *Yder* version is entirely light-hearted, with no ominous aftermath; nor is there any suggestion that the lady and her husband are other-world figures.

[37] Numbers 6 and 7 respectively in *Eighteen Anglo-Norman Fabliaux*, ed. by Ian Short and Roy Pearcy, Anglo-Norman Text Society, Plain Texts Series 14 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2000). They will also be included in my forthcoming anthology, *A Book of Anglo-Norman*; the anthology is currently in draft form.

A further search for comparable episodes in romance leads us to a differently misogynistic text: *Le Chevalier à l'épée*.[38] In this, the well-known hero Gawain moves out of an identifiably Arthurian space into a world of burlesque or fabliau.[39] But such texts vary profoundly in their apparent dispraise of women; here again the comedy is differently targeted.

In *Chevalier*, as in other Gawain romances, a hero who won his knighthood long ago (unlike Yder) has become famous throughout the fictional world he inhabits, and throughout the literary world of numerous stories about him — an audience's knowledge of these is assumed by authors who build upon this fund of tales. Accordingly, 'most of the humour is applied to a slight deflation of Gauvain.'[40] He is so inadequate as a lover that the lady in question abandons him for another man, hoping the latter will prove worthy and valiant, as soon as possible (983–97). He behaves 'unchivalrously' by dispatching the man; the 'misogynistic tirade' is spoken by Gauvain and not by the author; the narratorial voice says that the story started well but has become 'laide et anuiose' (1202). We, the audience, are invited to laugh at the hero's inadequacy. Nobody laughs at the woman, either inside or outside the story; she is punished by being abandoned in her turn. Gauvain tries to tell us how faithless women are, but we are not encouraged to sympathize with him.

The main point here is that Yder does not complain about the faithlessness of women, he shows no inadequacy as a lover, the woman in the episode we are examining is entirely unlike the woman in *Chevalier*: she is a test of Yder's worthiness and no more. It is she, not the hero, who is 'deflated' by mockery.

General Conclusion

The distasteful episode in which the hero kicks a lady in the stomach is, unlikely as this may at first seem, set up as a piece of comedy. All the women in the story are portrayed as talkative and powerful; the actions of this one are especially necessary to the plot because her success would prevent the hero becoming a knight and thus stifle the story at its outset. However, her behaviour is dishonourable, and therefore she is the butt of everybody's mirth when she fails to seduce the hero.

Kei likewise behaves dishonourably, and he is frequently a laughing-stock in spite of — indeed, because of — the fact that he nearly kills the hero twice. Because he does not succeed either time the comedy, surprisingly again to our modern feeling, remains comic as far as the romance is concerned. For a male character to be the butt of a poet's humour is not uncommon; in this romance a female character is untypically mocked, for trying to destroy the hero. If either had succeeded, there would be no comedy — and no romance.

[38] *Two Old French Gauvain Romances, Part I: Le chevalier à l'Épée and La mule sans frein*, by R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972).

[39] See Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008), p. 54.

[40] *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, p. 5.