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Loyalty and treason in some Middle English Breton Lays

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The text of *Sir Launfal* contains two monosyllabic adjectives almost identical in sound except for the initial consonant: *lel* at line 326 and *fel* at line 157. To the mortal who has sworn service to her, the fairy Tryamour gives her loyal white steed, Blaunchar, as a token of faithful love and magic assistance. 'I yeve the Blaunchar, my stede lel.' The reliable mount will appear she guarantees whenever the worthy knight under oath needs it. The epithet is precisely the opposite of *fel* applied to the wicked and duplicitous queen. 'Than seyde Quene Gwenore, that was fel'. It comes from the Old French *fels*, which means both *treacherous* and *rebellious*. In Middle English its equivalent comes in multiple forms, the most obvious of which is *false*, strikingly recurrent in *The Erle of Tolous* (ET, 20, 130, 252, 288, 758, 786, 1097). The letters *fel(s)* evoke the beginning of the noun *felon*, a cruel, deceitful and spiteful character with a destructive potential. He is capable of a base act that betrays the feudal tenet of loyalty and the courtly ideal of *trowthe*, also spelt *trouthe*. His treasonable conduct deviates from the established law and order, and from propriety when he gives in to blasphemy. Guilty of transgressing a commitment, the traitor is sometimes designated by a term with a derivational affix like *untrewe*, *unhende* applied to Emaré's iniquitous mother-in-law in *Emaré*, (534, 794). The negative definition testifies to the idea that mendacity is perceived as a shortcoming, a failure to honour a promise or a commandment. The first commandment exhorts man to 'love the Lord (his) God with all (his) heart, and with all (his) soul, and with all (his) mind.'¹ According to the second, he must love his neighbour as himself. When this special bond is broken, it is a case of disloyalty (*dis-love* in a way).

The fundamental biblical principle provides the ethical basis of the society in which the lay's protagonists live. The Breton lay is concerned with love, its celebration or betrayal, and more often than not is set in a feudal context in which a lord and his vassal have taken an oath of mutual fealty, and where love relations are presented in terms of a covenant that engages, not to say betroths, a dame to a knight. In medieval times, the individual is subsumed into the community, whether a court, a household, a family, or a convent. He is closely linked to the group or class he belongs to by a set of rules of conduct that make it a duty for a member to adhere to his oath of fidelity and honour his pledge to the party he is bound to. Social stability then depends on obedience to the lord's (sometimes the king's) authority. However, the harmonious social structure could be endangered by a disloyal proceeding that defies the sovereign, such as that Launfal is wrongly accused of when the queen unscrupulously claims he made advances to her. If subversive actions or perfidious words jeopardize the agreement between two parties, trust is violated, which leads to a breach of faith detrimental to the pledge given or promise made without which the edifice of human relationships is sure to collapse. The malicious gossip spread by the envious childless lady at the beginning of *Lai Le Freine* besmirches her neighbour's reputation as a righteous and faithful wife. The treacherous woman tries to sow the idea in everybody's mind that the innocent wife has committed adultery, as her begetting twins would tend to prove. Middle English Breton lays always include at some point in the plot the portrayal of a felonious character of some dramatic importance, or at least they obliquely raise the question of the purport of loyalty through situations in which a protagonist's trustworthiness is put to the test or betrayed, or in which his unfaithfulness to a pact thwarts the court, the royal couple or discredits his own lineage. Special attention has often been paid to the treatment of love, adventure, and the marvellous in the analysis of lays. Yet as the *Orfeo* poet puts it, some lays are 'of trecherie and of gile' (SO, 7). I would like to focus on the way loyalty and betrayal interact in these texts to offer a picture of a world of close political, familial, marital and amorous ties that, when severed, bring about a crisis that needs to be resolved.

¹ André Crépin, 'Le concept de trahison dans l'Angleterre du Haut Moyen Age', *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Age*. Actes du 3^e colloque international de Montpellier, Université Paul-Valéry (24-26 novembre 1995). Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A., n°3. Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry : Montpellier III, 1997, p. 63. The author of the article is referring to *Matthew*, XXII, 37-39.

Oath taking is common practice in the Middle Ages and has its own rhetoric and gesture symbolism. Degaré suits action to the word as he kneels down before the hermit, who taught him *clergies* (SD, 270) and *clerkes lore* (287), to swear he will leave no stone unturned until he has found his parents.

He knelede adoun al so swathe,
And thonked the ermite of his live,
And swor he nolde stinte no stoned
Til he his kinrede hadde ifounde.
(SD, 307-10).

In *The Erle of Tolous* the second deceitful knight in love with Beauybon asks her to pledge her word that she will keep his revelation secret, which she does earnestly without hesitation:

“Ye muste holde up yowre honde
To holde counsaile, ywys.”
“Yys”, seyde the lady free,
“There to my trouthe here to the,
And ellys y dudde amys.”
(ET, 629-33).

As the honest lady puts it, the moment a powerfully binding oath is infringed, an unnatural act of felony is perpetrated that hampers or at least delays the victim's self-fulfilment, happiness or love. The villain's mind is entirely set on hindering the hero's progress. He fulfils the dramatic function of the opponent whose subversive activities add spice, dynamism and suspense to the plot. The confusion and disorder resulting from such falseness temporarily darken the world sketched in the lay, and imply the necessary restoration of firm, steadfast norms that must be devotedly observed for the social institutions to work properly. Guenever's lie about Launfal's so-called indecent proposal might have the worst consequences on the knight's fate. Arthur vents his anger at his vassal in a vehement tone, calling him a 'fyle ataynte traytour' (SL, 761) and reproaching him 'a fowl lesynge!' (765). In speaking of punishing Launfal, the king is faithful to the oath of reciprocal conjugal trust, like that sworn in *The Franklin's Tale* (86-87) by Dorigen to Arveragus: "Sire, I wol be your humble trewe wyf, / Have heer my trouthe, til that myn herte breste."² By threatening his knight of death penalty, Arthur in *Sir Launfal* is caught between the loyalty pledge to his vassal and his engagement to the lady who was betrothed to him. Still, the king's rage is tempered by his knights' awareness of the wanton queen's villainy (SL, 786-92). Arthur's blindness³ to the truth and insistence that Launfal should be hanged and quartered is counterbalanced by the twelve judges swearing on the Bible (786), a clue

² All the quotes from *The Franklin's Tale* are drawn from A.C. Spearing, ed., *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale from The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer*, Cambridge: C.U.P., (1966) 2007.

³ The example of a lord disregarding his loyalty duty to his vassal can be found at the beginning of *The Erle of Tolous*. The German emperor, Dyoclysyen, falsely dispossesses his vassals of their lands. Among the knights wronged by the mighty choleric monarch is The Earl of Tolouse, Syr Barnard (ET, 19-30). The war he wages against the cruel emperor appears legitimate. His rebellion cannot be mistaken for an act of high treason (32-34; 55). The empress's plea for mercy on the innocent earl's behalf is unheeded: "My dere lord, y you pray. / Delyver the Erle hys right." (47-48). The judicial connotation of the word *ryght* points to her quarrelsome husband's betrayal of the feudal pact. Further in the text, the adjective *wyght* ironically suggests that the earl's right might has the better of his enemy's felonious affront. 'An hundred men that day he slowe, / So wyght he was yn were!' (96-97). Because the quarrel started by her husband is false, she claims, the wise Beauybon talks him out of fuelling a war she deems right (143) from the offended vassal's point of view. She advocates reconciliation. "Hyt ys better ye be acorde" (140). The emperor's view of the situation is entirely biased on account of his warlike predisposition and misconception of honour. The treason motif is doubled in that the emperor's breach of the feudal code of mutual respect and service is echoed by his eminent baron's own betrayal of Syr Barnard's trust in him. Syr Trylabas, the baron, swears loyalty to Syr Barnard, his prisoner, by referring to the code of honour (194-95), and yet he feigns to comply with the *covenant* (218). The rumour of Beauybon's outstanding beauty, confirmed by Syr Trylabas's description, incites Syr Barnard to behave in a noble manner in freeing his prisoner (210) on condition he can see the lady. The words "Y tryste to the as to my frende" (230) in the earl's mouth bear out his earnest wish to honour his pledge. The loyal nobleman goes further in promising his *frende* a goodly sum of money for his favour provided the latter stands by his promise to give him an opportunity to gaze at the lady. The exchange between the two knights is replete with terms related to the notion of a pact (193-240). Still as stress is put on the idea of an agreement based on mutual trust, we should expect the contract to be breached by a traitor. The latter's duplicity is soon disclosed in the poet's aside (250-52): 'The knight bethought hym on a day, / The gode Erle to betray; / Falsely he can begyne.'

towards the final clearing of the innocent.⁴ Launfal is torn between the official fealty oath to his lord and the personal and secret courtly love covenant that binds him to Tryamour. If he tells the truth about the queen's seduction attempt, he runs the risk of pitting the court against him and being charged with *lèse-majesté* or, even worse, high treason, which concerns the violation by a subject of his allegiance to his monarch, a crime punishable with death. The concept was officially defined in the 1352 Statute of Treason⁵ as any attempt made on the sovereign's life or his family's — or any plot against the security and peace of the kingdom. Launfal will also inevitably lose his fairy mistress, who will cease to be true to her pledge to provide him both with love and riches. Is it to be inferred from *Sir Launfal* that it is illusory to deem oneself able to keep one's word? It may well be on account of the power of external events over inner determination. Besides, the lay could be construed as an oblique indictment of the excessively constricting law of silence requested from the lover. The poem contains some echoes of the *fin amor*'s rigid rules,⁶ but these resonances are wrapped up in the less courtly, more *bourgeois* style of the 14th century.

Exemplified by Launfal's white armour turning black (SL, 742-43) after he has disobeyed his mistress, treason is felt as a blemish and a trauma. It explains why traitors in our Breton lays are unanimously condemned and done away with so that the social group can be preserved from their nefarious influence. Guenever swears she will have her gray eyes put out, using an imperative (SL, 810), if the knight produces a fairer lady, according to the court's decision (*proferynge*, 805). It is therefore only natural that when the proof is given of Tryamour's superior beauty, the malevolent queen should be literally blinded by the fairy's magic breath without the king's slightest objection (SL, 1007-09). The two felonious knights in *The Erle of Tolous* are burnt after being unmasked by Syr Barnard. 'The Erle answered hym then, / "Therefore, traytours, ye schall brenne / Yn thys fyre, bothe at onys!" (ET, 1130-32).⁷ The felon must be overpowered and ostracised, because his perfidious actions have laid bare, not to say betrayed, society's flaws and cracks. Without a danger coming from a dysfunctional element, a community would not be momentarily shaken, and would lack an opportunity to react efficiently to ward off, even eradicate the threat and assert the pre-eminence of order, faith and love.

Sir Orfeo also partly deals with faithfulness both in love and friendship. Orfeo's love for Heurodis is such that he gives up his kingdom and royal privileges for ten years to live dejected in the wild. His unshakeable trust in his loyal steward leads him to entrust the latter with his throne during his long absence (SO, 205-08). After the steward has passed the fealty test successfully, Orfeo keeps his word to make him king after his death.

"For to assay thi gode wille,
And ich founde the thus trewe,
Thou no schust it never rewe.
Sikerlich, for love or ay,
Thou schust be king after mi day."
(SO, 568-72).

Being true to one's promise is also practised in the Otherworld by the fairy king who, though a dark character, is capable of loyalty in sticking to his rash engagement to reward the minstrel for his exceptional musical skills. Let into the castle in accordance with the conventional arrangement between a patron and a visiting minstrel, Orfeo is promised to take whatever he wants with him from the fairy court (SO, 450-52). Yet the fairy king first reneges on his pledge when he hears Orfeo's request for the beautiful lady sleeping under the grafted tree. The patron's failure to observe the

⁴ The twelve knights swearing on the Bible are reminiscent of the twelve judges in *The Book of Judges* in the *Old Testament*.

⁵ J.G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in English Legal History, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1970) 2004, p. 59-101.

⁶ In *Sir Launfal* the initiative in the love relationship is left to the hero, but Tryamour spells out the terms of the contract, a covenant imposing silence about their love. It pertains to the *fin' amor* tradition, according to which any infraction to the engagement will invalidate the gift bestowed on the lucky knight.

⁷ In *The Erle of Tolous*, the two infamous felons are burnt by Syr Barnard himself. 'The Erle anon them hente, / And in the fyre he them brente, / Flesche, felle, and boonys.' (ET, 1133-35).

contract would definitely be interpreted by a medieval audience in terms of a betrayal of the largesse and trustworthiness he is expected to show as the lord of the court. A sovereign too, Orfeo aptly reminds his fairy counterpart that breaking his engagement would undoubtedly discredit him.

“O sir! he seyde, “gentil king,
Yete were it a wele fouler thing
To here a lesing of thi mouthe!
So, sir, as ye seyde nouthe,
What ich wold aski, have y scold,
And nedes thou most thi word hold.”
(SO, 463-68).

Orfeo cleverly appeals to the king’s sense of the courtly ethos that includes promise-keeping (in the public sphere of the whole court) as a requirement, with which the host of fairyland complies. This particular passage in the lay suggests that an oath is always liable to be betrayed. Pledging one’s word implies the risk of failing to hold it. Before the tournament, Degaré is so anxious to joust that he passes himself off as his own servant to inform the monarch that “his master” will pit himself against him in the lists, which the king welcomes enthusiastically eager as he is to display his well-known superiority in the handling of arms.

“De par Deus!” quath the King, “he is welcome.
Be he baroun, be he erl,
Be he burgeis, be he cherl,
No man wil I forsake.
He that winneth al sschal take.”
(SD, 478-82).

The king’s passion for jousting has the better of social prejudices and class distinctions. Theoretically the knights’ caste is exclusive, but the king departs from the chivalric rule of fights among equals. The king’s bending the established order indicates that fame and lineage are not the absolute condition for the winner of the joust to be designated heir to his kingdom. The dramatic irony lies in that Degaré shows himself worthy of the enviable position he wins at the joust, but is already worthy as a princess’s son without being aware of it.⁸ The princess is *sori* (585) and *carful* (592) she has to marry a stranger, whose pedigree she knows nothing about.

To a knight that sche never had sen,
And lede here lif with swich a man
That sche ne wot who him wan,
No in what londe he was ibore;
Carful was the levedi therefore.
(SD, 588-91).

Pedigree is what matters the most in the aristocratic sphere, which accounts for the lady’s affliction. Her father has broken the tradition. He trusts Degaré, whose heroic fight is, according to him, proof of his nobility, at least of heart and conduct, if not of birth.

“Min hende sone, com hider to me:
And thou were al so gentil a man
As thou art staleworht man therto,
Me thouwte mi kingdoms wel biset:
Ac be thou werse, be thou bet,
Covenaunt ich wille the holde.”
(SD, 594-601).

⁸ C. Stokoe, Jr. William, “The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*”, *Modern Language Association*, PMLA, Vol . 70, N° 3, June 1995, p. 530.

True to his word (of honour because he is both a knight and a king), the princess's father suits the deed to the word. However choleric and the prey to excessive not to say incestuous jealousy, the king is capable of largesse and loyalty. He would rather sacrifice his daughter's happiness than pass for a traitor.

The most obvious example of the acute sense of the solemnity and virtual sacredness of the allegiance bond is the medieval conception of marriage as conveyed in the lays under study. From the woman's perspective, marriage is interpreted as a pledge of obedience to the spouse. Le Codre in *Lai le Freine* is betrothed, affianced to Sir Guroun by his vassals who literally act as his mediators in this contract. He first refuses and then eventually resigns himself to accepting it. 'The forward was ymaked aright, / And were at on, and treuthe plight.' (LF, 325-26). Once married, the lady is bound by conjugal fidelity to her husband, whose trust must not be deceived. Nevertheless, this is exactly what Guenever does to Arthur, "faithful" to her reputation of having 'lemmannys under her lord, / So fele ther nas noon ende.' (SL, 47-48). Her promiscuity is put forth as the reason why Launfal dislikes his lord's queen — whom the latter has not chosen by the way (37-43). A vassal swearing absolute fidelity to his liege in accordance with the feudal code of conduct makes a homage oath, just as a *fin amant* swears to love and honour his lady in conformity with the *service d'amour*, a notion at the core of the *Grand chant courtois*. In other words, the lord-vassal bond is akin to the courtly covenant. Dame Tryamour utters a vow in a few words that seem as ethereal as she is, since she is a fairy who appears and vanishes at will. "Yf thou wylt truly to me take / And alle wemen for me forsake, / Ryche I wyl make the." (SL, 316-18). Her speech is ephemeral, but because she pledges her word it is given substance and becomes frozen, fixed both in the very moment it is uttered and in eternity. The oath that engages Launfal to her sets the action into motion again at a point where the story seems to have reached a dead end, since Launfal is wandering about in self-imposed exile. It provides the plot with an internal logic, and invests it with the accents of a fable on the potentially dreadful consequences of the inability to overcome a difficulty, go through an ordeal without breaking a pact. Launfal performs love service to his lady in saying the words: "I am to thyn honour!" (312). The line is reminiscent of the rhetoric of liege-homage adopted by the French *trouvères* to voice the poet-lover's commitment to the beloved.⁹ Chaucer draws upon this late 12th-century poetic tradition in *The Franklin's Tale*. Arveragus wins Dorigen's heart by doing 'his paine / To serve (her) in his best wise' (FkT, 58-59), and 'namely for his meke obeisaunce' (67). When she eventually falls 'of his accord' (73) and yields to his unrelenting courtship, Arveragus 'swoor hire as a knight' (73) that he would not claim *maistrie* (75) over her, but instead serve her while nonetheless, the poet adds, acting as a lord. 'Save that the name of souverainetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree' (78-79). His liege-homage oath encourages Dorigen to undertake to become his 'humble and trewe wyf' (86). The words borrowed from the semantic field of fealty (*swoor, maistrie, souverainetee, obeye, trewe, my trouthe, accord*) tinge their betrothal vow with the grave solemnity of a vassal's oath. Greater weight is given to the earnestness of their agreement. The diegesis is momentarily suspended by a remark on the incompatibility of love with domination in marriage (92-98). The six-line aside closes on the image of a perfectly harmonious match in which his promise of *patience* towards his wife resonates with her pledge to be unfailingly loyal.

And therefore hath this wyse worthy knight,
To live in ese, suffrance hir bihight,
And she to him ful wisly gan to swere
That never sholde ther be defaute in here.
(FkT, 115-18).

The squire first strikes the reader's attention as a traitor figure, when he swears his love to his lord's wife. But he pleads guilty, arguing with pathos that he suffers from the *mal d'amour*: "I for yow have swich disese" (FkT, 642). He considers himself dead when she defines the impossible terms of the contract, according to which he will obtain her favours on condition he remove the black rocks on the

⁹ Marie-Geneviève Gossel, "Comme home a dame en ligée par serement." Donner sa foi en chantant : serment et service d'amour chez les trouvères', *Serment, promesse et engagement : rituels et modalités au Moyen Age, études recueillies par Françoise Laurent, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée (Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A.)*, 2008, p. 135-150.

coast. Faithful to the secrecy oath to which the *fin amant* is subjected, the ‘woful creature’ (413) feels ‘dispeyred in his torment’ (412) for two years, during which he keeps his passion for Dorigen secret. Then he comes to an agreement, a financial transaction at first sight, with the well-versed Orléans clerk, who pledges himself to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared on the horizon. The contract worth one thousand pounds no less (551-52) that binds the desperate lover to the illusion maker, the ‘subtile tregetoure’ (469), ironically reflects Dorigen’s conjugal oath never to behave like an “untrewe wyf / In word ne werk” (312-13), and always “ben his (Arveragus’s) to whom that (she is) knit”. The past participle *knit* with a judicial connotation is used later by Aurelius who assures the clerk he is happy to honour the *bargain*. “This bargain is ful drive, for we been knit.” (558). The dialogue with the magician abounds in terms referring to word-pledging (555-62). The holy knot, to which she swears she will stick funnily enough is eclipsed, swept aside — somewhat like the rocks by the clerk’s magic — by the promise that if he finds a way of making her wish come true by ridding the coast of the rocks, she will love him “best of any man” (325). She declares: “Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I can.” (326). Now Dorigen is bound to ‘holden hire biheste’ (491). The code of honour in a society that values the obligation to stand by a promise is essential and therefore cannot be disregarded. If the lady fails to do so, she will be held a felonious woman guilty of covering her name and above all her husband’s with shame, which is the corollary of treason: “Than moste she nedes holden hir biheste, / Or elles he shal shame hire atte leeste.” (491-92).

Aurelius legitimately expects compensation for his service. In accordance with the courtly ethos, any gift on the lover’s part calls for a “counter-gift”, a *gerdon* — that comes from the Old French *guerredon*. “My gerdon is but bresting of myn herte”, he complains when he confesses his love to Dorigen (301). The deal clinched with the clerk brings Aurelius the promise of the joy of being paid back, requited with Dorigen’s love at long last. The honourable lady cannot possibly go back on her oath.¹⁰ It would be tantamount to treason morally speaking. Against her will, she refrains from reneging on her promise, like the fairy king in *Sir Orfeo*. Aurelius’s speech borrows from the semantic isotopy of commitment and obligation to warn her against the temptation of betrayal: “er that ye breke youre trouthe” (648), “wel ye woot ye han hight” (651), “Ye woot right wel what ye bihighten me” (655), “Dooth as yow list; have youre biheste in minde” (663). Their engagement he reminds her was officialised in the symbolic gesture that suited her word when she promised: “And in myn hand your trouthe plighen ye / To love me best, got woot, ye seyde so” (656-57). Like Launfal, Dorigen is entrapped by a hard and fast set of rules that oblige her to comply if she does not wish to be found disloyal. On the other hand, she laments, if she adheres to her pledge to the squire she will fatally betray her husband. The only way out of the moral dead end into which her rash promise has thrown her is death rather than the dishonour of being *defouled* — a word that recurs six times over thirty lines in her complaint (724-55). The absurd and extreme consequence of such an implacable logic of honour is to renounce life for the sake of being true to one’s word!

In this passage of the *Franklin’s Tale* (639-66), solemn allegiance to a lord is closely associated with the pathos of torment and remorse caused by the duty to honour one’s word. As I have attempted to show, *The Franklin’s Tale* frequently borrows from the rhetoric of loyalty, whereas a lay like *The Erle of Tolous* emphasises treason and duplicity, the other side of the coin. The queen Beaulion enjoins the treacherous Trylabas to refrain from any ‘false sleythe’ (ET, 288). The lines (280-97) in which she exhorts him to loyalty to Syr Barnard is contaminated by the isotopy of oath-keeping as well as *traytory* that rimes with *velany* (294-95).¹¹ The two synonyms form a rhyming couplet echoing the association of *trowthe* (291) with *othe* (294), sharply contrasted with *rowthe* (meaning “villainy” or “infamy”) at line 297.

¹⁰ Robert D. Edwards, ‘Rewriting Menedon’s Story: *Decameron* 10.5 and *The Franklin’s Tale*’, *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales. New Essays on an Old Question*, Leonard Michael Koff & Brenda Deen Schildgen, eds. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London: Associated University Press, 2000, p. 235. The author of the article remarks that Dorigen makes a terrible mistake ironically enough, when she makes her pledge “in pley” (line 988). ‘The distinction between earnest and game, that most venerable of authorized Chaucerian antinomies (I. 3186), collapses, as we shall see, because in a social and personal world constructed solely on the strength of promise, every pledge (serious or playful) has to be taken literally, at face value.’

¹¹ The tail-rhyme stanza pattern goes as follows: *aabccdcdeed*.

“Y rede the holde thy trowthe!
Certys, yf thou hym begyle,
Thy soule ys in grete paryle,
Syn thou haste made hym othe;
Certys, hyt were a traytory,
For to wayte hym wyth velany;
Me thynkyth hyt were rowthe!”
(ET, 291-97)

Her allusion to the implacable logic of reciprocal commitment and then her mentioning treachery have the effect of restoring the traitor's sense of fidelity, or so it seems. After the empress has given Syr Barnard her ring as a love token, enacting a symbolic betrothal (399-405), the loyal knight rewards Syr Trylabas, but the latter, cursed by the poet in another aside (414), is plotting against his benefactor again: ‘A traytory he thoght to doo / Yf he might come thertoo; / So schrewde in herte was hee!’ (415-17). He calls on two relatives, Kaunters and Kaym, to help him carry out a perfidious plan. They attack the earl, who defends himself fiercely and kills them. *The Erle of Tolous* is the only lay in the Laskaya and Salisbury edition that portrays several villains. The emperor blindly trusts two knights who watch over his dear wife. The trouble is they are both in love with her. Lust pushes them to resort to treachery to win the lady's favours. On the sly, *prevely* (518), they are up to an act of felony. When the first knight declares his love disease,¹² she calls him “a traytour in (his) saw” (565), because according to the 1352 Statute of Treason, he is guilty of high treason, which means he should be hanged and quartered, as she reminds him (572). As for the second knight, had she not pledged to keep his secret before he revealed it (655), she replies that she would have sentenced him to death by hanging too.

Anxious to take their revenge, the two rebuffed knights make one last attempt to test Beauliybon's unshakable faithfulness to her husband by persuading the innocent and loyal young carver to hide naked in the lady's chamber. Throughout this particular passage the traitors are depicted as ‘false men’ (758), who ironically manipulate the language of treason in a most skilful manner, managing to convince the other knights at court that the young carver is a ‘false traytour’ (763) guilty of having betrayed his lord (788). They get even with Beauliybon by accusing her of lying, and swear in public that her wantonness (*horedam*, 798) shall be punished with death (875-77). Their treachery seems contagious, as the emperor misled into believing lies starts bandying words like *dyshonour* (861). The trial occurs the next day, and a champion is sought to clear the lady's name in a fight. Syr Barnard will prove her *trew*e to her husband (903), whereas his love for her, requited as indicated by the love token she gave him, invites her to commit the sin of adultery in a way. At the end of the poem, the blasphemous¹³ knights are defeated by Syr Barnard, and Beauliybon's honour is saved. They confess to high treason and are burnt at the stake (1134-35). Grateful to his wife's mysterious champion, the emperor makes it a point of honour to thank him (1155; 1179). When he finds out it is Syr Barnard of Tolous, he willingly keeps his promise although the latter used to be an enemy. The tale ends on a scene of male reconciliation (1180-89) sealed by the kiss of loyalty (1196). Lastly following the emperor's death three years later, the lady's marriage with the earl, who has been appointed steward of the royal estate, is legally approved by the noblemen. In a specular equation Beauliybon's faithfulness is reflected in Dorigen's loyalty. Both evince an exemplary righteousness and unflinching adherence to their pledges. The difference between the two poems is that *The Erle of Tolous* is more strikingly impregnated with feudal undertones. In *The Franklin's Tale*, on the contrary, the clerk's conclusion at

¹² Both felonious knights view Beauliybon as an object of carnal desire. They are motivated by mere self-gratification, ignoring the *fin amor* principle of discretion (*conseyle*) in the sense of secrecy. They also fail to look up to her as a mystery to be deciphered and contemplated from afar. They make excessive love declarations, which sound like parodies of the courtly discourse. They subvert the rhetoric of love as restraint and moderation. By overstepping it, they transgress the norm of the courtly love ethos, and as a result downgrade it into fake love, namely the exact opposite of the true love shared by Beauliybon and Syr Barnard.

¹³ One of the treacherous knights insults the false monk, who is actually Syr Barnard disguised as a religious to hear Beauliybon's confession of her innocence — a white lie which can be read as a betrayal of the sacrament of confession! The traitor calls the earl dressed as a monk “lythyr and lees!” (1087). He is guilty of blasphemy, a most serious offence.

the end on the squire's praiseworthy ability to behave as nobly as a knight suggests that the *service d'amour* in Chaucer's time, nearly two centuries after the courtly love trend in literature, has cast off the original feudal array for a less elitist and idealistic, more modern and democratic outlook, since Dorigen, Arveragus, their squire, and the clerk prove true to their promise regardless of rank. They are put on an equal footing. At least so they seem in Chaucer's perplexing riddle submitted to the judgment of an audience that extends beyond the limits of the court (949-52).

What is to be made of the treatment of loyalty and treason in *Sir Gowther*? This lay, as it is called at lines 28-30, concentrates all the aspects of villainy, and more specifically treason, in one single character, whereas *The Erle of Tolous* multiplies the embodiments of the same notion. The penitential romance of an immoral youth, whose crimes are an offence to God, relates his metamorphosis into a saintly figure that works miracles thus honouring God, whose loyal servant he proves to be in the end. Gowther wanders and errs as a sinful knight who betrays God's commandments before he eventually becomes aware of the iniquity of his actions, explained by his diabolic nature that equates him to the Antichrist. Gradually he changes from a traitor to God into His devoted follower. Like Judas,¹⁴ he embodies a paradox in that he was sired by the devil to perform atrocious exactions, especially against the religious since he goes as far as setting a convent on fire after raping some sixty nuns. Yet such unforgivable blasphemy is probably designed to highlight his subsequent contrition and exceptional penance, which are presented as a prerequisite to his admirable saintliness at the end. *Sir Gowther* tells the story of a cursed Elect, diabolically cursed and divinely elected, evolving from Judas's utmost felony to Jesus's salutary and redemptive power. The virtuous Gowther at the end of a poem that reads more like a saint's life than a lay needed the vicious Gowther of the beginning to rise to the status of a worshipped miracle-worker. The adventure is spiritual, though it includes the slaughter of an army of Saracens, the Christians' sworn enemies. So is love, though it is shared between the emperor's daughter and God, the ultimate Lord to serve.

Fidelity derives from *fides*, both a Latin word and a Roman concept. It belongs to the same lexical field as *perfidy*. The difference is that *perfidy* means precisely the opposite: disloyalty or the breaking of a pact of mutual confidence.¹⁵ It is always an innocent and virtuous character who falls victim to a traitor's words filled with venom or some treacherous plot. The common point between Launfal, Emaré and Beaulyon is that they have an untroubled consciousness and mean no harm, even when they wrong their beloved in the young knight's case. A traitor has to be unmasked and always is in the end. The poet's asides here and there in the text explicitly point at the despicable felon with the intention to blame his conduct and deplore the victim's helplessness in face of such deceit and falseness. Yet the dramatic climax reached in the sometimes proleptic exposition of the villain has a cathartic function. In *Sir Degaré* at lines 613-26 the poet suddenly interrupts the narrative to break into a lament on the incestuous match that binds the young knight to the defeated king's daughter, Degaré's own mother actually. Yet at the end he drops a hint at the happy conclusion of this taboo alliance. 'Lo, what aventure fil hem thar! / But God, that alle thingge mai stere, / Wolde nowt that thai sinned ifere' (SD, 626-28). Confounding a felonious knight, servant or wife is a way of asserting the essential quality of a covenant and exposing treason as a counter-example by means of a great deal of terms that convey the seriousness and sanctity of loyalty as a notion. An act of felony, not to say treason, needs to be named, spelt out to be averted and exorcised. Either traitors confess their felony, like Le Freine's mother when she is reunited with the daughter she once abandoned, or they are severely punished in some kind of expiatory sacrifice,¹⁶ like Queen Guenever deprived of her eyesight for having spoken ill of Launfal. Both women behave like the *losengiers*, those malicious scandalmongers at the court found in the French minstrels' poetic production in the late 12th and 13th

¹⁴ *Félonie, trahison et reniements au Moyen Age*. Actes du 3^e colloque international de Montpellier. Université Paul-Valéry (24-26 novembre 1995). Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A., n° 3. Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III, 1997, 631 pages. Several articles in this collection are about Judas "qui fuit proditor", who was a traitor. Jean-Pierre Perrot, 'La trahison et son imaginaire : le cas de Judas', p. 9-20, Jean R. Scheidegger, 'Traître ou sauveur ? Judas dans les traditions chrétienne et juive du Moyen Age', p. 21-34, Guy Borgnet, 'La trahison dans la *Passion de Donaueschingen*', p. 121-133.

¹⁵ Michel Tarayre, 'La notion de reniement dans le *Speculum Maius* de Vincent de Beauvais', *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Age*. Actes du 3^e colloque international de Montpellier. Université Paul-Valéry (24-26 novembre 1995). Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A., n° 3. Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III, 1997, p.104.

¹⁶ This is what René Girard calls *le mécanisme victimaire* necessary to keep at bay or stave off the danger that threatens a peaceful social structure.

centuries.¹⁷ Le Freine's mother is modelled on the ill-intended *losengier* whose function is to spread rumours. She subverts and misrepresents the confidence of lovers and friends. Likewise Guenever's venomous gossip smears a loyal knight's valour and good name in *Sir Launfal*. She introduces temporary disruption in the harmonious order of things at court by garbling its values and rules of conduct. The well-known figure of Arthur's unfaithful wife fulfils the role of the opponent who tries to separate the lovers and undermine the discourse of *trouthe* by tainting it with that of guile and deception.

What is striking in the various lays under study is that the traitor figure can be designated through an excessive use of adjectives and nouns as in *The Erle of Tolous*, just as blind adherence to a loyalty oath, whether feudal or conjugal, is profusely expounded in *The Franklin's Tale*. Yet other lays contain some instances of ironic hints at treason. Sir Guroun, 'a riche knight of lond and fé' (LF, 252), acts like a trickster and an unscrupulous liar when he promises the abbess that he will renounce knighthood as well as his "londes and rentes" (282) to take holy orders — a promise he will not keep. He virtually commits an act of blasphemy because the only reason he pledges his word to do so is to be in Le Freine's presence. As for the maiden, she is guilty of betraying Christ, her one and only Lord, as she deserts the nunnery as well as her duty to God and the abbess who acted as a true loving mother to her and faithfully preserved the evidence of her high lineage. The young lovers' minor betrayals are implicitly condoned because they are bound to each other by unfailing love. Still the common denominator between the lays is that the traitor, a necessary evil, is eventually ostracised, when he is not put to death. The anti-knight, anti-*fin amant* or even anti-saint serves to enhance the valorous knight, the true lover, or God's devoted servant. The intention is not to ignore the danger of slander, dissimulation and treacherous plotting but to contain it for society's good.

In *Sir Degaré* unaware that his victor is no other than his own grandson, the king earnestly states he will stick to his word:

"Covenant ich wille the holde.
Lo, biforn mi barons bolde,
Mi douwter I take the bi the hond,
And seise the her in al mi lond.
King thou scalt ben after me:
God graunte the god man for to be!"
(SD, 601-06).

This oath puts both the old king and the young knight under an obligation endowed with a sacred quality. The French word *serment* stems from the Latin *sacramentum*.¹⁸ Breaking an oath therefore is tantamount to offending God before whom the pledge has been made. Besides, the very utterance of the solemn promise makes it official, lends it the authority of a ritual performed under divine supervision. More than a mere promise, the king voices an allegiance pact with Degaré, a contract both politically and economically motivated.¹⁹ The verb forms *wille holde* (601) and *scalt ben* (605) are in the future tense so as to stress the performative quality of the words spoken as well as the seriousness of the commitment. The monarch's *fama* or reputation is at stake. Consequently going back on his pledge would infringe the code of honour on which rests the chivalric world depicted in the lay. It would be a blatant act of felony if he failed to show himself faithful to the undertaking he has given and verbally sealed. Words can be used either to enforce or contravene an agreement. Gowther sticks to the penance imposed by the Pope — keeping silent to avoid misusing and perverting

¹⁷ Marcel Faure, 'Le losengier dans la chanson de trouvères des XIIe et XIIIe siècle', *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 189-195.

¹⁸ Claude Gauvard, 'Introduction', *Serment, promesse et engagement : rituels et modalités au Moyen Age*, études recueillies par Françoise Laurent. Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée (Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A.), 2008, p.16.

¹⁹ Equally motivated by political and economic interests, the match between Sir Guroun and Le Codre in *Lai Le Freine* is forced on the young knight by his counsellors, who stand for the social order flouted by their lord's illegitimate out-of-wedlock relationship with Le Freine. In the end Sir Guroun gives up asserting his right to individually chosen love in face of too coercive an institution like marriage. This passage in the lay (311-26) may be construed as an indirect criticism of the common practice in the higher sphere of arranged marriages, which were disguised political alliances designed to secure the privileges of the moneyed, landed class.

language in a blasphemous oath against God. The other de-humanizing humiliation he is subjected to concerns the prohibition to take food except from the mouth of a dog, an animal associated in the Middle Ages with aggressiveness and treachery.²⁰ Because he proves faithful to his pledge to redeem himself, the Lord holds his promise by bestowing on Gowther the gift of curing the sick and the invalid.

For so God hase hym hyght;
Thes wordus of hym thar no mon wast,
For he is inspyryd with tho Holy Gost,
That was tho cursod knight;
For he garus tho blynd to see
And tho dompe to speyke, pardé,
And makus tho crokyd right,
And gyffus to tho mad hor wytte,
And mony odur meracullus yette,
Thoro tho grace of God allmyght.
(SG, 735-44).

Now if God himself is true to his word, man is not allowed to betray. The poet himself should be no exception to the rule. The English poets of the lays under consideration may well be accused of betraying their sources, from which they somewhat moved away by introducing changes, especially fresh tonalities, new accents, different motifs to update the original material and adapt it to the insular context of the 14th and 15th centuries. The makers of these lays, anonymous for the most part, revive and modify pre-existent material, either elaborating on it or on the contrary condensing it. As Michel Zink reminds us, the Latin word *autor* stems from the verb *augere*, which means *develop, extend, augment*.²¹ The author of *Sir Gowther* built his literary artefact on *Robert le Diable* written about two centuries earlier. *Sir Launfal*, purportedly composed by Thomas Chester, is an outgrowth of *Lai de Lanval*. It could be compared to the *ympe-tre* in *Sir Orfeo* that triggers the sudden appearance of the fairy into the so-called real world, offering an extension to it and alternative reflection of it. Now this reflection, distorted though it may be with time, should not be deemed a betrayal of the original, since both rest on an essential lie to the audience: they create the illusion of orality/aurality but are in fact artificially re-created by a poet, re-produced by a scribe — and performed by a minstrel or so they claim. The lays are based on a lie, which is sometimes ironically signalled by the poet barging in to guarantee the authenticity of facts previously reported in the source. To ensure us of Launfal's mettle in combat, the poet writes: 'Thus seyde the Frennsch tale' (SL, 474). In the evocation of the joust with Syr Valentyn, the poet insists 'That Syr Launfal helm of glod, / In tale as hyt ys telde' (575-76). The feast celebrating his triumph is 'Ryche, ryall, and honeste / (What help hyt forto lye?)' (632-33). In so doing he reminds us of his primary role as a translator in the medieval interpretation of the word. Our English poets in the process of translating older compositions demonstrate that an *autor* can actually pass on a tale without betraying the spirit, even if he changes the letter. This paradox proves the adage *traduire, c'est trahir* wrong. Drawing upon a previous text is both a homage paid to and a deviation from it. It is like a fool's game played with a smile of complicity by an author torn between loyalty and betrayal to both his source and audience.

²⁰ Jacques Voisenet, 'Le bestiaire de la félonie', *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Age.*, op. cit., p. 160.

²¹ Michel Zink, Collège de France, France Culture. Cours 3/9 du 23 janvier 2013, "*Quel est le nom du poète ?*" <http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/michel-zink/course-2012-2013.htm>