

Loyalty and Treason in Some Middle English Breton Lays

Agnès Blandeau

The text of *Sir Launfal* contains two monosyllabic adjectives almost identical in sound except for the initial consonant: 'lel' (326) and 'fel' (157). The first term is seen when to the mortal who has sworn service to her, the fairy Tryamour gives her loyal white steed, Blaunchard, as a token of faithful love and magic assistance: 'I yeve the Blaunchard, my stede lel.' The reliable mount will appear, she guarantees, whenever the worthy knight needs it. The epithet provides an opposition to the term 'fel', applied to the wicked and duplicitous queen: 'Than seyde Quene Guenore, was fel.' The word *fel* comes from the Old French *fels*, which means both *treacherous* and *rebellious*.¹ The Middle English equivalent comes in multiple forms, the most current of which is *false*, strikingly recurrent in *The Erle of Tolous*.² The letters *fel(s)* further relate to the cognate *felon*, a cruel, deceitful and spiteful character with a destructive potential, capable of a base act that betrays the feudal tenet of loyalty and the courtly ideal of *trouthe*. The *felon*'s treasonable conduct deviates from established notions of law and order, and even from propriety when he commits blasphemy. Guilty of transgressing a commitment, the traitor is sometimes designated in terms containing a derivational affix such as 'untrewe' or 'unhende,' which is applied to Emaré's iniquitous mother-in-law.³ The negative modifier testifies to the idea that mendacity is perceived as a shortcoming, a failure to honour a promise or a commandment.

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.⁴ Throughout much of the medieval period, the individual 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 to honour his pledge as Marc Bloch pointed it out in *La société*

¹ Jacques Chocheyras, 'Le sens du terme "félon" dans la *Chanson de Roland* et le *Tristan* de Bérout', in Marcel Faure (ed.), *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Âge*, 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.*, 3, Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 1997, p. 51-57. See also Jacques Voisenet, 'Le bestiaire de la félonie', *ibid*, p. 153-154, and Florence Plet, 'Le roi Marc, "fel et traîtres" dans le Roman de Tristan en prose', *ibid*, p. 335.

² See 20, 130, 252, 288, 758, 786 and 1097.

³ See 534 and 794.

⁴ Marie-Geneviève Grossel, "Comme home a dame en ligée par serement." Donner sa foi en chantant : serment et service d'amour chez les trouvères', in Françoise Laurent (ed.), *Serment, promesse et engagement : rituels et modalités au Moyen Âge*, (coll. 'Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A.'), Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2008, p. 135-150. The author remarks on the feudal metaphor used as early as the twelfth century by the French minstrels to refer to the love oath (see esp. p. 143).

féodale.⁵ Social stability depends on obedience to the lord's authority. However, the harmonious social structure described here is jeopardised by disloyal proceedings that defy the sovereign, such as Launfal's wrongful accusation by the treacherous queen (712-720). 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 *Lay Le Freine* besmirches her neighbour's reputation as an honourable and faithful wife (59-72). The treacherous woman tries to sow the idea in everybody's mind that the innocent wife has committed adultery, as proven by her begetting of twins. As the *Orfeo* poet puts it, some lays are 'of trecherie and of gile' (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 or threatened, result in a crisis that needs resolution.

Oath-taking is a common practice in the Middle Ages and has its own rhetoric and gesture symbolism, as illustrated in *Serment, promesse et engagement: rituels et modalités au Moyen Age*.⁶ Degaré suits action to word as he kneels down before the hermit, who taught him 'clergies' (270) and 'clerkes lore' (287), to swear he will leave no stone unturned until he has found his parents:

He knelede adoun al so swithe,
And thonked the ermite of his live,
And swor he nolde stinte no stounde,
Til he his kinrede hadde ifounde (307-310).

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

'Ye muste holde up yowre honde
To holde counsayle, ywys.'
'Yys,' seyde the lady free,
'Thereto my trouthe here to the,
And ellys y dudde amys' (629-633).

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 even love relation. 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, in accordance with the 'actantial model' conceived by Greimas. The confusion and disorder resulting from such treachery temporarily darken the world sketched in the lay, and imply the necessary restoration of firm, steadfast conventional behaviour

⁵ Marc Bloch, *La société féodale* (1939), Paris, Albin Michel, Bibliothèque Évolution de l'humanité, 1994.

⁶ F. Laurent (ed.), *op. cit.*

that must be carefully observed for the social institutions to work properly once again. Guenore's lie about Launfal's so-called indecent proposal might have serious consequences for the knight. Arthur vents his anger at his vassal vehemently, calling him a 'fyle ataynte traytour' (761) and reproaching him for 'a fowl lesyngel' (765). In his intention to punish Launfal, the king evokes the ideal of reciprocal conjugal trust, as seen most clearly in the oath Dorigen swears to Arveragus in *The Franklin's Tale*: 'Sire, I wol be your humble trewe wyf, / Have heer my trouthe, til that myn herte breste' (86-87). By threatening his knight with death, Arthur in *Sir Launfal* is caught between the loyalty he pledges to his vassal and his commitment to the lady who was betrothed to him and whom he believes nevertheless. Still, the king's rage is tempered by his knights' awareness of the wanton queen's villainy (786-792). Arthur's blindness⁷ to the truth and insistence that Launfal should be hanged and quartered is counterbalanced by the twelve judges swearing on the Bible (786), an indication that the innocent will be cleared in the end.⁸ Launfal is torn between the official oath of fealty to his lord and the personal and secret love covenant that binds him to Tryamour. If he tells the truth about the queen's attempt to seduce him, he runs the risk of pitting the court against him and being charged with *lèse-majesté* or, even worse, high treason,⁹ which concerns the violation by a subject of his allegiance to his monarch, a crime punishable with death. Launfal's loss of his fairy mistress, who ceases to provide him with love and riches, allows for the question of whether it is illusory to deem oneself able to keep one's word. The lay can be construed as an oblique indictment of the excessively constricting law of silence requested of the lover.

Treason is shown as both a blemish and a trauma, as exemplified by Launfal's white armour turning black (742-743) after he has disobeyed his mistress. This explains why traitors in the Breton lays are unanimously condemned and done away with so that the social group can be preserved from their nefarious influence.¹⁰ Guenore swears she will have her gray eyes put out (810), if the knight produces a fairer lady, as the court has decided to allow him to do ('proferynge,' 805). It is therefore natural that when the proof of Tryamour's superior beauty appears, the malevolent queen should be literally blinded by the fairy's magic breath without the king's slightest objection (1007-1009). The two felonious knights in *The Erle of Tolous* are burnt after being unmasked by Sir Barnard: 'The Erle answered hym then, / "Therefore, traytours, ye schall brenne / Yn thys fyre, bothe at onys!"' (1130-1132).¹¹ The felon must be overpowered and ostracised,

⁷ The example of a lord disregarding his duty to a vassal can be found at the beginning of *The Erle of Tolous* (13-36).

⁸ The twelve knights swearing on the Bible are reminiscent of the twelve judges in *The Book of Judges* in the *Old Testament*. It is the jury system, in penal law.

⁹ Defined in the 1352 Statute of Treason as any attempt made on the sovereign's life or his family's – or any plot against the security and peace of the kingdom and punishable with death; J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (1970), Cambridge Studies in English Legal History, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 59-101.

¹⁰ James Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative and Proper Name: *Sir Dégaré*, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*, and the Anglo-Norman *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*', in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds), *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Harlow, Longman, 2000, p. 122-141.

¹¹ In *The Erle of Tolous*, the two infamous felons are burnt by Sir Barnard himself. 'The Erle anon them hente, / And in the fyre he them brente, / Flesche, felle, and boonys' (1133-1135).

because his perfidious actions have laid bare, not to say betrayed, society's flaws and cracks. Without 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 and loyalty.¹²

Sir Orfeo also raises questions of 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 (205-208). After the steward has successfully passed a test proving his fidelity, Orfeo keeps his word to make the steward king after his death:

‘And ich founde the thus trewe,
Thou no schust it never rewe.
Sikerlich, for love or ay,
Thou schust be king after mi day’ (569-572).

Being true to one's promise is also practised in the Otherworld by the fairy king who, though a dark character, proves his loyalty when he keeps his rash engagement to reward the minstrel's exceptional musical skills. Admitted into the castle in accordance with the conventional arrangement between a patron and a visiting minstrel,¹³ the king promises Orfeo that he may take whatever he wants with him from the fairy court (450-452). Yet the fairy king refuses at first to fulfil his pledge when he hears Orfeo's request for the beautiful lady sleeping under the grafted tree. The patron's failure to observe the 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 schold,
And nede thou most thi word hold’ (463-468).

Orfeo cleverly appeals to the courtly ethos that includes promise-keeping and the king 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

¹² It would be tempting to add love to order and loyalty, but the later romances and Breton lays diverge greatly from the pre-eminence that Chrétien de Troyes gave to love.

¹³ Seth Lerer, ‘Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*’, *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, 60/1, Jan. 1985, p. 92-109. ‘If the poet's description reveals the hollowness of fairy artifice, then the moral vacuity of the king himself is clearest in his attempt to renege on his promise to the minstrel. Orfeo and the king strike a bargain based on social convention: he entertains the king, and the king is so well pleased that he offers a reward’ (p. 104).

his own servant to inform the monarch that his master will pit himself against the king in the lists (472), 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’ (478-482).

The king’s passion for jousting gets the better of social prejudices and class distinctions. Theoretically the knights’ caste tends to be exclusive,¹⁴ but the king departs from the chivalric rule of fights among equals, or at least within a limited circle. The king’s bending of the established order indicates that fame and lineage are not necessary for the winner of the joust to be designated heir to his kingdom. The dramatic irony lies in the fact 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.¹⁵ The princess is ‘sori’ (585) and ‘carful’ (592) that 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 (588-591).

Birth is what matters most in the aristocratic sphere, which accounts for the lady’s affliction, and of course adds to the irony here for an audience that does know precisely where he was born and of whom. 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 rank – as happens in many other romances:

‘Min hende sone, com hider to me:
And thou were al so gentil a man
As thou semest with sight upan,
And ase wel couthest wisdomes do
As thou art staleworht man therto,
Me thouwte mi kingdoms wel biset:
Ac be thou werse, be thou bet,
Covenaunt ich wille the holde’ (594-601).

True to his word of honour as both a knight and a king, the princess’s father decides to maintain his promise. However choleric and prey to excessive, not to

¹⁴ Richard Barber, *The Reign of Chivalry* (1980), Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2005, p. 94. See also Sébastien Nadot, *Le spectacle des joutes. Sport et courtoisie à la fin du Moyen Age*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Collection ‘Histoire’, 2012, introduction p. 11-31. ‘Cependant, des participants de milieux trop disparates socialement ne peuvent pas s’affronter [...]’ (p. 15).

¹⁵ William C. Stokoe, Jr. ‘The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*’, *PMLA*, 70.3, June 1995, p. 518-534, here p. 530.

say incestuous jealousy, the king is capable of *largesse* and loyalty. He would rather sacrifice his daughter's happiness than be seen as disloyal or unfaithful to his word in the sense of the Old French *fel*.

The most obvious example of the acute sense of the solemn, virtually sacred quality of the allegiance bond is the medieval conception of marriage as conveyed in the lays. Marriage is interpreted as a pledge of obedience to the spouse, especially from a woman's perspective.¹⁶ Le Codre in *Lai le Freine* is affianced to Sir Guroun by his vassals, who act as his mediators in this contract. He first refuses and then eventually resigns himself to accepting the marriage. 'The forward was ymaked aright, / And were at on, and treuthe plight' (325-326). Once married, the lady is bound by conjugal fidelity to her husband, whose trust must not be deceived – and he to her, on a theoretic level. However, the breach of trust is found in the figure of *Sir Launfal's* Guenore, who is 'faithful' to her reputation of having 'lemmannys under her lord, / So fele ther nas noon ende' (47-48). Her promiscuity is put forth as the reason why Launfal dislikes his lord's queen. 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*. Dame Tryamour utters a vow in fleeting 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' (316-318). 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. But any speech act is ephemeral by nature. 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. This scene 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, or to 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.¹⁷ Chaucer draws upon this late twelfth-century poetic tradition in *The Franklin's Tale*. Arveragus wins Dorigen's heart by doing 'his paine / To serve [her] in his best wise' (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 acting as a lord. The poet or narrator could also be claiming here that Arveragus wanted to keep the outward appearance of sovereignty to maintain his social position. What is otherwise the 'name of soverainete' (my emphasis) without *maistrie* (78-79)? His liege-homage oath inspires Dorigen to undertake to become his 'humble and trewe wyf' (86). The words *swoor*, *maistrie*, *soverainete*, *obeye*, *trewe*, *my trouthe*, *accord* are

¹⁶ Claude Gauvard, 'Introduction', in F. Laurent (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 15. The author uses a paronomasia to stress the key importance of pledging one's word: 'le serment est le ciment de la société' (p. 23). Marriage is one form of covenant or alliance among others, she explains.

¹⁷ M-G. Grossel, art. cit.

evocative of the semantic field of the feudal oath¹⁸. They tinge the betrothal vows with the grave solemnity of a vassal's allegiance. Thus, 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 ends with 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 wise, worthy knight,
To live in ese, suffrance hire bihight,
And she to him ful wisly gan to swere
That never sholde ther be defaute in here (115-118).

The squire first strikes the reader's attention as a traitor figure, when he swears his love to Arveragus's wife. But he pleads guilty, arguing with pathos that he suffers from the *mal d'amour*: 'I for yow have swich disese' (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 coast. Faithful to the oath of secrecy to which the lover 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 promises to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared from the horizon. The contract, worth one thousand pounds no less (551-552) 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' (312-313), 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 (555-562). The holy knot 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.

Aurelius legitimately expects compensation for his love service. In accordance with the courtly ethos, any gift on the lover's part calls for a 'counter-gift', a 'gerdon' – from the Old French *guerredon*.¹⁹ 'My gerdon is but bresting of myn herte' (301), he complains when he confesses his love to Dorigen. 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

¹⁸ Grossel, *art. cit.*, p. 140-141.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Gaucher, 'Pacte fatal, pacte foetal : l'enfant né sur parole. Valeur performative de la prière dans *Robert le Diable*', *ibid.*, p. 111-120, here p. 114. See also Grossel, *art. cit.*, p. 140.

forfeit her oath.²⁰ 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' (656-657). Like Launfal, Dorigen is trapped 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 led her is death rather than the dishonour of being 'defouled' – a word that recurs six times over thirty lines in her complaint (724-755). 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* (639-666), 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, a darker version of the same debate. The queen Beauybon enjoins the treacherous Trylabas to refrain from any 'false sleithe' (288). The lines in which she exhorts him to loyalty to Sir Barnard (280-297) are contaminated by the isotopy of oath-keeping as well as 'traytory' that rimes with 'velany' (294-295).²¹ In this particular passage, the two synonyms form a rhyming couplet echoing the association of 'trowthe' (291) with 'othe' (294), sharply contrasted with 'rowthe' (meaning 'villainy' or 'infamy') of line 297:

'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!' (291-297)

Her allusion to the implacable logic of reciprocal commitment and then her mention of treachery have the effect of returning the traitor to faithful action, or so it seems. After the empress has given Sir Barnard her ring as a love token (399-405), the loyal knight rewards Sir Trylabas, but the latter, cursed by the poet in

²⁰ Robert D. Edwards, 'Rewriting Menedon's Story: *Decameron* 10.5 and *The Franklin's Tale*', in Leonard Michael Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen (eds.), *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales. New Essays on an Old Question*, Fairleigh, Dickinson University Press and London, Associated University Press, 2000, p. 226-246, here p. 235. The author of the article remarks that Dorigen makes a terrible mistake, ironically enough, when she makes her pledge 'in pley' (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.'

²¹ The tail-rhyme stanza pattern goes as follows: *aabccddccdeed*.

another aside (414), is plotting against his benefactor again: 'A traytory he thocht to doo / Yf he might come thertoo; / So schrewde in herte was heel!' (415-417). 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 actually pushes them to resort to treachery to win the lady's favours. On the sly, or 'prevely' (518), they commit and act of felony. When the first knight declares his love disease,²² Beaulbyon calls him 'a traytour in [his] saw' (565), because 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. Eager to take their revenge, the two rebuffed knights make one last attempt to test Beaulbyon's unshakable faithfulness to her husband by persuading an innocent and loyal young carver to hide naked in the lady's chamber.²³ In a specular equation, Beaulbyon's faithfulness is reflected in Dorigen's loyalty. Both evince an exemplary righteousness and unflinching adherence to their pledges.

What is to be made of the treatment of loyalty and treason in *Sir Gowther*? This lay,²⁴ as it is called (28-30), concentrates all the aspects of villainy, and more

²² Both felonious knights view Beaulbyon 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. This is, after all, one major approach to reading later romance – in terms of a parody of courtly love. 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 Beaulbyon and Sir Barnard.

²³ Throughout this particular passage the traitors are depicted as 'false men' (758), who ironically manipulate the language of treason most skilfully, managing to convince the other knights at court that the young carver is a 'false traytour' (763) guilty of betraying his lord (788). They get even with Beaulbyon by accusing her of lying, and swear in public that her wantonness ('horedam,' 798) shall be punished with death (875-877). Their treachery seems contagious, as the emperor, himself 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. Sir Barnard will prove her 'trewer' 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. At the end of the poem, the blasphemous knights are defeated by Sir Barnard, and Beaulbyon's honour is saved. One of the treacherous knights insults the false monk, who is actually Sir Barnard disguised to hear Beaulbyon'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 knights confess to high treason and are burnt at the stake (1134-1135). Grateful to his wife's mysterious champion, the emperor makes it a point of honour to thank him (1155; 1179). When he finds out that it is Sir 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 (1180-1189) 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. All is well that ends well.

²⁴ Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990. In her introduction, the author reminds us that *Sir Gowther* has been labelled a secular hagiography, but also an exemplary or homiletic romance (p. 12). She refers to it as a romance that follows a penitential pattern (p. 20).

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.²⁵ Gradually he changes from a traitor to God into His devoted follower. Like Judas,²⁶ he embodies a paradox: he was sired by the devil to perform atrocious exactions, and 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 (265-300). *Sir Gowther* tells the story of an Elect, diabolically cursed and divinely elected, evolving from Judas's utmost felony to Jesus' salutary and redemptive power. The virtuous Gowther at the end of a poem that reads more like a saint's life (721-744) 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.

Fidelity derives from *fides*, both a Latin word and a Roman concept, as explained by Michel Tarayre. *Perfidy*, the exact opposite, denotes disloyalty or the breaking of a pact of mutual confidence.²⁷ It is always an innocent and virtuous character who falls victim to a traitor's venomous words or a treacherous plot. The common denominator between Launfal, Emaré and Beauliybon is that they have an untroubled consciousness and mean no harm, even when, in the case of the young knight, the beloved is harmed. A traitor has to be unmasked, and always is in the end. The poet's asides here and there in the text explicitly point to the despicable felon, blaming his conduct and deploring the victim's helplessness in face of such deceit and falseness. In *Sir Launfal* (817-828) for instance, the narrator pledges his word that the young knight was in the Slough of Despond because at the end of one year and fourteen days he is still without news from Tryamour, and thinks himself doomed. Yet the dramatic climax reached in the sometimes proleptic exposition of the villain has a cathartic function. In *Sir Degaré* 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 (613-626), who is in fact Degaré's own mother. At the end he nonetheless 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' (626-628). Confounding a felonious

²⁵ Neil Cartlidge, 'Sons of Devils', in Neil Cartlidge (ed.), *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2012, p. 219-236.

²⁶ See *Félonie, trahison, reniements*, *op. cit.* Several articles in this collection are about Judas 'qui fuit proditor,' who was a traitor. See 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 Âge', p. 21-34, Guy Borgnet, 'La trahison dans la *Passion de Donaueschingen*', p. 121-133.

²⁷ Michel Tarayre, 'La notion de reniement dans le *Speculum Maius* de Vincent de Beauvais', *ibid.*, p.104.

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 number of terms that convey the seriousness and sanctity of loyalty as a notion. An act of felony needs to be named, in order 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 (385-398), or they are severely punished in some kind of expiatory sacrifice,²⁸ like Queen Guenore, who is deprived of her eyesight for being unmasked as a liar when Launfal is eventually vindicated (809-810). Both women behave like the *losengiers*, those malicious scandalmongers at the court found in the French minstrels' poetic production in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁹ Le Freine's mother is modelled on the ill-intended *losengier* whose function is to spread rumours. She distorts and misrepresents the confidence of lovers and friends. Likewise Guenore's venomous gossip smears a loyal knight's valour and good name in *Sir Launfal*. She introduces temporary disruption to the harmonious order of things at court by subverting 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 Breton lays is that the traitor figure can be designated through an excessive use of adjectives and nouns, as in *The Erle of Tolous* (413-417, 431, 738, 758, 764, 868, 1087). Similarly, blind adherence to a loyalty oath, whether feudal or conjugal, is profusely expounded in *The Franklin's Tale*. In *Sir Degaré*, unaware that his victor is no other than his own grandson, the king earnestly states he will stick to his word:

'Covenaunt ich wille the holde.
Lo, her 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!' (601-606)

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*.³⁰ 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, and lends it the authority of a ritual performed under divine supervision. More than a mere promise, the king voices a pact of allegiance with Degaré, a contract both politically and economically motivated.³¹ The future forms

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Marcel Faure, 'Le losengier dans la chanson de trouvères des XII^e et XIII^e siècles', in Marcel Faure (ed.), *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Âge*, op. cit., p. 189-195.

³⁰ Claude Gauvard, 'Introduction', in F. Laurent (ed.), op. cit., p. 16.

³¹ 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 extra-marital relationship with Le Freine. In the end Sir Guroun gives up asserting his right to individually chosen love in the face of the social pressure leading him

‘wille holde’ (601) and ‘scalt ben’ (605) stress the performative quality of the words spoken as well as the seriousness of the commitment. The monarch’s 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. However, words can be used either to enforce or to contravene an agreement. Gowther sticks to the penance imposed by the Pope – keeping silent to avoid misusing and perverting 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.³² 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 knyght;
 For he garus tho blynd to see
 And tho dompe to speyke, pardé,
 And makus tho crokyd ryght,
 And gyffus to tho mad hor wytte,
 And mony odur meracullus yette,
 Thoro tho grace of God allmyght (735-744).

The idea on which I would like to close this article concerns the assumption of the Middle English Breton lay author’s betrayal to his source of inspiration. Because God is true to His word, man should not be guilty of an act of betrayal. It may be assumed that the poets under study somewhat betray, or at least are unfaithful to their sources, from which they diverged by introducing changes, especially fresh tonalities, new accents, different motifs to update the original material and adapt it to the insular context of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Compared to the French text, the addition of a quite long tournament scene in the heart of *Sir Launfal* is a case in point. 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*.³³ The author of *Sir Gowther* grafted his literary artefact onto *Robert le Diable* written about two centuries earlier, which he considerably condensed and more openly modified into a penitential romance. *Sir Launfal*, purportedly composed by Thomas Chester, is an outgrowth of the intermediate Middle English version, *Sir Landeval*, itself an

to marriage. This passage in the lay (311-326) 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.

³² Jacques Voisenet, ‘Le bestiaire de la félonie’, *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Âge*, op. cit., p. 160.

³³ 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>, last accessed June 6, 2014.

adaptation of Marie's *Lai de Lanval*.³⁴ This process could be compared to the *ympe-tre* in *Sir Orfeo* that triggers the sudden appearance of the fairy into the world of the narrative, offering an extension to it and an alternative reflection of it. This reflection, distorted though it may be with time, should not be deemed a betrayal of the original, as I presumed it to be at the beginning of this conclusion, 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. Although it is not specific to the genre, the lays are a fabrication, an artefact, sometimes ironically signalled by the poet interfering 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 Frensch tale' (474). In the evocation of the joust with Sir Valentyn, the poet insists 'That Syr Launfal helm of gold, / In tale as hyt ys telde' (575-576). The feast celebrating his triumph is 'Ryche, ryall, and honeste / (What help hyt forto lye?)' (632-633). In so doing he reminds us of his primary role as a translator in the medieval interpretation of the word. 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.

³⁴ Peter J. Lucas, 'Towards an Interpretation of *Sir Launfal* with Particular Reference to Line 683', *Medium Ævum*, 39.3, 1970, p. 291-299. The author underlines the fact that '[...] *Launfal* draws on a number of *different* 'sources' for episodes that are interconnected' (p. 291). As Professor Bliss remarks, 'the interrelation of *Sir Launfal* and its sources is intricate' (p. 2).