2006

From turmoil to discourse | the function of rape and incest in fourteenth-century "popular" Middle English romance

Desiree Cromwell

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Cromwell, Desiree, "From turmoil to discourse | the function of rape and incest in fourteenth-century "popular" Middle English romance" (2006). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 2416.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2416

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
The University of
Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: Déciée Cromwell

Date: 5/2/00

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
FROM TURMOIL TO DISCOURSE: THE FUNCTION OF RAPE AND INCEST IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY "POPULAR" MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

BY

DÉSIRÉE CROMWELL

B.A. UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA – MISSOULA, 2004

PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

MAY, 2006

APPROVED BY:

[Signature]

CHAIRPERSON

[Signature]

DEAN, GRADUATE SCHOOL

5-2-06

DATE
Until recently, critics have devalued “popular,” Middle English romances based on their seemingly unsophisticated and bawdy subject matter. They have dismissed them as crude, formulaic texts in favor of their French ancestors or English contemporaries deemed of a higher aesthetic quality, despite the prominent place romance held as a secular genre in medieval England. The prominence of “popular” romance, however, particularly in fourteenth-century England, begs an examination of the cultural circumstances that allow for and contribute to its emergence. The disinterest in Middle English romance stems in part from a failure to connect it to the cultural circumstances that give significance to the genre.

Bringing a historical focus together with a literary focus, this project aims to contextualize the existence of “popular” Middle English romance to better understand the function of this genre. Placing “popular” Middle English romance in the historical context of the fourteenth century elucidates the way it, through its content and structure, reflects not a lack of sophistication but the crises and social unrest of fourteenth-century England caused by famine, plague, war, and catastrophic death tolls.

This project discusses the content and rupture/resolution form of “popular,” Middle English romance and its use of incest and rape motifs as symptomatic of the breakdown of society due to crisis. This project, moreover, discusses the structural function of the rape and incest motifs and the cultural conditions that give the structure of “popular” romances meaning. Building on the theories of Northrop Frye, this project seeks to examine the narrative function of agon (or crisis) in “popular,” Middle English romance and, ultimately, suggests that the agon presented in these texts – often issues of inheritance – is culturally specific and directly related to the conditions of the romances’ emergence. The form of the romances and the motifs they employ stem from and reflect the cultural conditions in which they were produced. Ultimately, this analysis of “popular,” Middle English romance seeks to discuss the relationship between language and crisis in an attempt to elucidate the cultural significance of these texts and to exemplify the way cultural turmoil generates discourse and the way textual structure can reflect crisis.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................... ii

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS ................................................................................................. iv

INTRODUCTION:
THE TUMULTUOUS FOURTEENTH CENTURY: A POINT RUPTURE ............................... 1

CHAPTER 1:
THE EMERGENCE OF “POPULAR” MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE .............................. 25

CHAPTER 2:
RUPTURE AND RESOLUTION ......................................................................................... 45

CONCLUSION:
FROM TURMOIL TO DISCOURSE .................................................................................... 70

NOTES .................................................................................................................................. 75

WORKS CITED ..................................................................................................................... 84
CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1307
- Death of King Edward I of England. Edward I's son, Edward II succeeds to the throne.
- Edward II brings Piers Gaveston, exiled by Edward I for his relationship with and influence on Edward II, back to England.

1308
- Edward II marries Isabella of France, daughter of Philip IV and sister of Charles IV.

1312
- Piers Gaveston is assassinated.

1315-1322
- Great Famine throughout Europe.

1315-1325/26
- Bad weather in Europe results in poor crops.
  - Sheep and cattle epidemics.
  - Decrease in wool and cloth production.

1324
- War of Saint-Sardos fought between Charles IV of France and Edward II of England.

1327

1328
- Charles IV of France dies leaving only daughters. Charles' sister, Isabella, claims the throne for her son, Edward III (son of King Edward II of England).

1337
- King Philip VI of France seizes English duchy of Aquitaine. Start of the Hundred Years War.

1340
- Edward III formally assumes title of King of France.

1348-1349
- First outbreak of the Black Death in Europe.

1360
- Treaty between England and France. Edward renounces claim to French throne in exchange for Aquitaine and 3 million gold crowns.

1361-1362
- Second outbreak of plague in England.

1367
- Victory of Edward, the Black Prince, over Henry of Trastamara in Spain.

1369
- Third outbreak of plague in England.
  - War resumes between England and France.

1370
- Reoccurrence of famine in England.

1374-1379
- Fourth outbreak of plague in England.

1377
- Richard II, grandson of King Edward III, succeeds to the English throne

---

Information for the events listed in this chronology comes, in part, from Aberth.
at the age of ten.

1381 • Peasants' revolt (otherwise known as English rising) in England. Thousands of people, led by Wat Tyler, demand freedom from arbitrary taxes, fines, and rents that curbed wages and led to inequality in servile conditions.

1383 • Richard II marries Anne of Bohemia (dead 1394), daughter of Charles IV of France. The marriage produces no heirs.

1390-1393 • Fifth outbreak of the plague in England.

1396 • Truce declared between England and France, provoked by the marriage between Richard II of England and the French princess Isabella, daughter of Charles VI.


1400 • Outbreak of plague in England.

1407 • Outbreak of plague in England.
Introduction
The Tumultuous Fourteenth Century: A Point of Rupture

Allas, that evere sholde hit bifalle that in so litel a throwe,
Swiche men sholde swich deth thole, and ben i-leid so lowe.
("The Simonie," Dean 439-440)

Until recently, critics have devalued "popular" Middle English romances based on their seemingly unsophisticated and bawdy subject matter. ¹ They have dismissed them as crude and formulaic while favoring their rhetorically elegant French antecedents or English contemporary texts (such as the works of Chaucer or the Pearl poet) deemed of a higher literary quality, despite the prominent place romance held as a secular genre in medieval England (McDonald 1). Romances, however, have another side – a playful, artful one – that offers not just an amusing form of entertainment but an insightful look into the culture from which the romances emerged. Of the more than one hundred romances extant from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, more than half (at least fifty-five, in addition to those written by Chaucer and Gower) survive from the fourteenth century. ² The prominence of "popular" romance in fourteenth-century England demands an examination of the cultural circumstances that allow for, and perhaps contribute to, its emergence. That so many romances survive from this period – romances that by nature address cultural issues such as inheritance and dangers in the domestic sphere – suggests that the cultural circumstances of fourteenth-century England not only affected society at large, but influenced the issues romance writers addressed, the aesthetic desires of the audiences of the romances, and, ultimately the romance genre as a whole. The modern disinterest in and denigration of Middle English romance expressed by critics such as Clark H. Slover and Stephen Knight stems, in part, from a failure to connect it to the cultural circumstances that give significance to the formulaic
elements for which scholars criticize the texts. The following account of the fourteenth century seeks to contextualize the existence of “popular” Middle English romance in order to bring a historical focus together with a literary focus to better understand the cultural function of fourteenth-century “popular” romance. “Popular” romance, through its content and structure, reflects not a lack of sophistication, as several critics have claimed, but the crises and social unrest of fourteenth-century England. The issues addressed in these texts (such as those concerning social class, family unity, and patrilineal succession) suggest that “popular,” Middle English romance served an important function in its capacity to explore the social norms of various classes disrupted by crisis. Of the many crises that plagued fourteenth-century England, “popular” Middle English romances tend to depict those that threaten the survival of land-holding families in particular, whether through the absence of male heirs or by thwarting exogamous marriage unions. In so doing, these texts express anxieties culturally specific to the demographic crisis of fourteenth-century England and seek to create order through abstraction in the happy endings; that is, only by moving away from the textual events and ending in abrupt and often incongruous summary do these romances resolve themselves. While some critics have acknowledged that the subject matter of Middle English romances, often called “kitchen romances,” sharply differentiates them from their Old French antecedents, this distinction has almost always been drawn as further corroborating evidence of their inferiority as artistic creations and even more indicting evidence of their popularity in the worst sense of the word. Unlike many of the earlier twelfth-century French romances which have elaborate rhetorical skill, lengthy descriptive passages of court life, feasts, ceremonies, and sophisticated verbal repartee
concerning the nature of love, the Middle English romances tend to excise these artistic embellishments for more action and tighter plots. In terms of narrative structure, Middle English romances move away from the circularity and interconnectedness of French sources and instead utilize a rupture/resolution form rather than the more traditional quest pattern associated with French courtly romances.

The formulaic shape these romances take and the textual rupture they depict reflect the chaos in English society from which they emerged; that is, romance is the symbolic joining together of the disrupted social world and the literary world. The content of the texts expands the literary work to address concerns outside the texts. Similarly, the neatly-sutured endings for which these romances are known and often criticized indicate an almost desperate desire for social order and attempt to order the world by containing social disruption through literature.

Though no century has passed without turmoil and social unrest, the number and severity of events that plagued the fourteenth century – from famine and murrains to war and pestilence – make it one of the most calamitous of all periods. For this reason, the crises of fourteenth-century Europe, their effects on European society as a whole and England specifically, and the way society responded to them are of considerable interest and, indeed, necessary to understanding literary productions during this period. John Simons insists on the necessity of reading texts within their social and cultural milieu, stating his "firm conviction that the literary text is, primarily, the product of a web of social forces, and that it achieves significance not only through its internal semantic structures, but also through an audience’s apprehension of its relationship to the social web in which they themselves are enmeshed" (105). The events that occurred during the
fourteenth century (the apostolic controversy, the depositions of Edward II and Richard II, the Great Schism, and the death of Simon Sudbury to name but a few) are, however, too numerous to examine in detail here; such a task is beyond the scope of this chapter which aims to provide a brief characterization of the events scholars tend to view as the most catastrophic: famine, plague, and war, "the apocalyptic horsemen" as John Aberth refers to them (91). To characterize the events of an entire century is, unfortunately and perhaps dangerously, to deal necessarily in summary and generalization rather than in-depth analysis. The following discussion of these events will thus provide only indicators of general trends and does not intend to provide a full scrutiny of all aspects, complexities, and crises of this century; scholars such as Barbara Tuchman and John Aberth have devoted entire books to detailing these crises. Moreover, though nearly all of Europe experienced the effects of crisis in the fourteenth century, this study, which focuses on Middle English romance, will primarily discuss the effects on English society. The following account of the calamitous events of the fourteenth century seeks to examine the period not in search of continuity — to understand the period as a point in history that parallels and explains other events in time — or to view it as a homogeneous whole but, instead, to examine it as a point of significant rupture, a period unlike any other when society had little if any respite from turmoil which caused disruptions of the social order. To view this period as a point of rupture and its crises as socially and culturally disruptive contextualizes the disorder depicted in Middle English romance and suggests that the textual chaos reflects and responds to the societal disruption concurrent with the composition of these texts. When placed in the historical context of fourteenth-
century England, Middle English “popular” romance, its tropes, and its form, appear less
formulaic and unsophisticated as they take on a greater cultural significance.

The Great Famine and the Agrarian Crisis

For tho God seih that the world was so over gart,
He sente a derthe on eorthe, and made hit ful smarte. [. . .]
A mannes herte mihte blede for to here the crie
Off pore men that gradden, 'Allas, for hungger I die
Up rihte!' (“The Simonie,” Dean 391-401)

While at one time historians asserted with confidence that the Black Death clearly
caus[ed] the decrease in population in the later Middle Ages, critics such as Ian Kershaw
now claim that society began to weaken decades before the Black Death in the years of
the famine. Kershaw suggests that rather than looking for the source of the decline in the
Black Death, a “freak epidemic” (3), one should look to the time when population
increased exponentially: “[T]he seeds of the population decline and agrarian contraction,”
explains Kershaw, “are to be found in the very period of expansion [. . .] [and] this
expansion had the makings of its own nemesis” (3). Prior to the famine and the Black
Death, Europe experienced a consistent surge in population growth until the thirteenth
century when the growth stabilized. Due to the increase in population, possibly as great
as 7 million in England in the early thirteenth century (Herlihy 80), people exhausted the
land and its resources to a point that they could no longer support the growing population.
According to Kershaw, “By the early fourteenth century population had outgrown
resources; England had too many mouths to feed” (3-4). This surge in population growth
caus[ed] the quality of land to decrease and the colonization of Europe, especially England,
to diminish.
In addition to England’s exhausted resources, poor weather in the decade of 1315-1325 contributed to the production of even worse crops and, consequently, less food and drastic fluctuations in prices of various foodstuffs, especially corn, salt, wheat, and other grains (Kershaw 8). The lack of food caused by poor crops coupled with the consequential rise in the prices of foodstuffs resulted in famine and eventual death for much of the population of England and approximately 10% of the entire European population (Kershaw 11). Even when people did find food, it was not necessarily nutritional and did not guarantee survival. On the contrary, the inevitable consumption of spoiled foods likely caused intestinal problems as well as death; other foods without such dire consequences still lacked sufficient vitamins (Aberth 15). The anonymous, politically-charged poem commonly titled “The Simonie” or “On the Evil Times of King Edward II,” dating shortly after the famine, notes the effects of the food shortage:

A busshele of whete was at foure shillinges or more,
And so men mihte han i-had a quarter noht yore [. . .]
And thanne gan bleiken here blé, that arst lowen so loude,
And to waxen al hand-tame that rathere weren so proude.

(393-398)

The speaker of “The Simonie” complains of the abuse of power by those who govern and describes events such as poor crop production, animal epidemics, political instability, corruption in the Church, and famine as punishments sent from god for wrong doing. In its depictions of the calamities of the period, “The Simonie” exemplifies the way literature of the fourteenth century, here quite blatantly, began to depict the effects of social crisis. As a response to the famine, “The Simonie” emphasizes food shortages as
well as the rise in food costs and consequential death faced by many people of England. Kershaw, noting the massive amount of famine-related deaths, explains “The bodies of paupers, dead from starvation, littered city streets; many were buried daily in every cemetery, and burial could not be delayed because of the foul stink [. . .]” (11). The catastrophic death toll of the famine and the visibility of its effects indicate it had a significant impact on the population of England decades before the Black Death.

To make matters worse, murrains affecting both cattle and sheep accompanied the high prices of foodstuffs; this resulted in additional price increases as well as a decrease in the exportation of wool, one of England’s principal commodities. Moreover, the deaths of cattle and sheep contributed to negative crop production in England by limiting the number of animals available to pull plows. The speaker of “The Simonie” notes:

Tho com ther another sorwe that spradde over al the lond.
A thusent winter ther before com nevere non so strong.
To binde alle the mene men in mourning and in care
The orf deiede al bidene, and maden the lond al bare
So faste.
Com nevere wrecche into Engelond that made men more agaste. (409-414)

As a consequence of the murrains, prices of cattle and oxen increased. In addition, the lack of wool consequent to the sheep murrains resulted in not only a decrease in cloth production but in exportation and thus money as well. As Kershaw notes, “[A]ll England’s major ports experienced a substantial decline in their export of wool during the decade of the crisis [. . .]. And in the following decade, 1325/6-1334/5, only the far-
northern ports of New Castle and Hartlepool recovered to export a greater quantity than their average in the 1305/6-1314/5 period" (22). Moreover, "[T]he southern ports of London, Southampton, and Sandwich recorded even worse returns between 1324 and 1328 – presumably brought about at least in part by the severe murrains experienced in the south-east at this time" (24). Between the years of 1305/6 and 1334/5, London experienced an export decline as great as 19% (23).

Inflation, heavy taxation, reduced exportation, and poor production of foodstuffs forced many unfortunate landowners who could not withstand the hardships of the famine years to sell their land to families in better positions. Indeed, as Ian Kershaw notes, court rolls "indicate [...] a considerable amount of severe rural disturbance and a good number of holdings changing hands" (37). This exchange of land holdings, as Kershaw suggests, would have been detrimental to a great number of landholders and their families. While the famine created the opportunity for families less affected to gain land and power at a low price, making it possible for them to ascend in class, it forced many landowners to relinquish their only resources in order to survive. Likewise, when an heirless landowner died, others eagerly snatched up his land to ensure their subsistence and the survival of their families. This abdication of land elucidates the severity of the effects of the famine as people did not easily relinquish something as important and valuable as land; as J.Z. Titow asserts, "[T]he choice before a large section of the population must have been to cultivate, however poor the holding, or to starve" (qtd. in Kershaw 36).

"Popular" Middle English romances such as "Chevelere Assigne" (1349), "Sir Eglamour of Artois" (1350), and "Sir Degaré" (1325) depict the effects of this exchange
of property through heirless landowners and their anxiety over not having a male heir to maintain their property. In “Sir Degaré” and “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” the landowners who have only female heirs must hand over their land to the men who marry their daughters. Through this loss of land and resources, the texts depict real loss experienced by landowners when they could no longer afford to maintain their land due to lack of money, death of animals, or death of laborers. Not having a male heir to inherit and ensure maintenance of one’s resources, a real possibility during the years of the famine, is but one way these texts express disturbance caused by this crisis. These romances depict not simply an anxiety over not having male successors but over losing land in general during a time when people had to divide or sell their land in order to support their families.

Although the most dramatic phase of the famine ceased by 1318 and agrarian conditions settled after 1322 (Kershaw 13-15), the persistence of sheep and oxen epidemics as well as droughts in southern England in the summers of 1325 and 1326 hindered the ability of people in England to recuperate from the effects of the famine; as Kershaw notes, “recovery in direct exploitation, where it was made, tended to be slow and partial. At best the crisis was a serious interruption of agrarian enterprise [. . .]; at worst it killed it” (35). The declining population, falling economy, decrease in exportation, drop in agricultural production, and loss of animals useful for production as well as food created a time of crisis for the people of England, one from which many people had difficulty recovering. Moreover, the low wool returns reported by areas in southern England between 1324 and 1328 and as late as 1334/5 point to continued adversity following the famine. Due to its severe effects, then, the famine, as Kershaw
asserts, replaces the Black Death as the divider between expansion and contraction in the fourteenth century.

The Black Death

[T]he air which had been clear and pure
Was now vile, black, and hazy,
Horrible and fetid, putrefied and infected,
And so it became completely corrupted [. . .]
Five hundred thousand died as a result,
So that father lacked son,
Mother lacked daughter, [and]
Son and daughter lacked mother
Because of fear for the plague. (Guillaume de Machaut 313-340)

The chaos in which England entered the fourteenth century continued during the plague-ridden years of the Black Death, which resulted in the deaths of approximately one third of the European population (though this figure varies). 7 As the fourteenth-century chronicler Henry Knighton writes in his description of the catastrophic effects of the Black Death, “[T]here was a general mortality among men throughout the whole world. It began first in India, and spread thence into Tharsis, thence to the Saracens, and at last to the Christians and Jews; so that in the space of a single year, [. . .] as it was rumoured at the court of Rome, 8000 legions of men perished in those distant regions, besides Christians [. . .]” (qtd. in Dobson 59). The infrequency with which people (especially peasants) bathed and changed their clothes, the composition of peasant houses (made with timber frames and earthen floors), and the presence of excrement and urine that people could not dispose of as easily as today created a fertile breeding ground for the plague, believed to have been carried by black mice and fleas. 8 These factors explain, at least in part, the speed with which the plague spread, “no otherwise than fire upon things dry or greasy, whenas they are brought very near thereunto” as described in
Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (2). Though the initial onset of the plague occurred in Europe in 1348-49, sporadic outbreaks of the epidemic followed in 1361-62, 1369, 1374-79, 1390-93, 1400, and on into the fifteenth century, leaving the population of Europe with little reprieve between outbreaks. Indeed, the variety of methods used to treat and prevent outbreaks of the plague – from aromatics and inhaling foul odors to prohibiting baths, regulating diet and exercise, avoiding sexual activity, purging oneself, bloodletting, bathing in one’s own urine, consuming mixtures composed of various elements, and even drinking the pus of lanced buboes⁹ – signal the state of continued desperation in which the epidemic left people during the fourteenth century.

The countless deaths caused by the plague and the speed with which it spread created a state of social chaos. Fear of contracting the plague moved people to avoid and even force into isolation those infected by or exposed to the disease. This fear, coupled with the absence of authority due to the deaths of officials and general disregard for laws, weakened the laws that governed society, religious, legal, and social. As John Aberth notes:

[L]aws were disregarded; doctors refused to tend the sick; priests feared to administer last rites; the sick and dead were treated no better than animals; any relative of a sick man was avoided; whole families were walled into their houses once the plague struck one of their members; no one could be found to bear away the stinking bodies of the dead, except unscrupulous grave-digging fraternities [. . . ]; [and] no one attended or cried at funerals. (131-132)
The plague led not only to disregard for the lives of others for the sake of saving one's own, but also to the collapse of societal order and a displacement of boundaries: priests refused to fulfill a fundamental part of their positions, people turned their backs on others in need—"And no one was so true a friend/That he was not thereupon neglected/[...]." If he fell ill with the disease" (Guillaume de Machaut 337-340) — and, because the dead outnumbered the living, people had to turn to corrupt laborers to bury their neighbors and members of their families. Society was, in a sense, turned on its head.

Just as the hardships of the famine forced many landowners to relinquish their property, the plague seriously depleted the male population more than any other and, consequently, deprived propertied families of heirs needed to maintain family resources. Moreover, as the male population diminished, the number of landowners with daughters increased, further disrupting issues of inheritance. During the 1370s and early 1380s, "the worst decade of all" for landowning families, according to Felicity Riddy, "fewer than half of landowning families produced sons" (245). Moreover, S.J. Payling points out that, during the same time, "the proportion of landholders [...] leaving daughters rose to 15 per cent; [...] leaving no children rose to as much as 29 per cent [...]" (54). The rise in the number of surviving daughters and the decrease in male heirs limited the possibility for landowners to continue their family lines and maintain power and resources. Unlike sons, daughters did not inherit land; instead, the families into which they married assumed their inheritances, thus reducing the resources of their birth families. As Georges Duby notes, while the marriage contract "guaranteed the married woman autonomous rights, both to her dower (dos) and to her expectations of inheritance," these rights were likely exerted by her husband (6). The lack of a male heir,
then, meant that land, and thus power, would change families through the marriage of
daughters, if, in fact, a female heir existed. According to Payling, “[T]he probability of a
child failing to survive his father was high; this resulted [. . .] in a considerable
expansion in the percentage of families with no surviving children at the expense of those
with surviving sons” (52). One need only look to “Sir Degaré,” which depicts three
fathers with female or no heirs, and “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” which depicts two, to
understand a landowner’s anxiety over losing property to families with male heirs; that
literature of the period depicts this anxiety suggests its pervasiveness.

Male succession was of extreme importance to landowners of the Middle Ages for
purposes of securing resources, maintaining power within a family, and creating stability.
Indeed, systems used to control inheritance point to both the importance of male
succession and the attempt to protect property and wealth. The aristocratic society of
Europe, as Georges Duby notes, adopted a “lineage-oriented family structure that was
modeled upon the royal example” for purposes of “safeguarding patrimony” (10). 10 By
implementing this system of inheritance, landowners attempted to ensure male succession
and avoid fragmentation of estate by settling all of their resources on male collaterals.
Male descendants, unlike female heirs, continued the family name and made certain land
and power held by a family would stay within that family. Gradually moving toward an
agnatic, “lineage-oriented” system of inheritance, landowners strengthened their authority
and ensured the subsistence of their families by maintaining power over their resources
through male succession.11 Duby regards this family structure as one of the factors that
contributed to the emerging stability among all levels of aristocratic society. It follows,
then, that the significant decrease in male succession brought on by the demographic crisis must have contributed to the increasing instability of English society.

The struggle to maintain resources during the years of the famine and the Black Death in addition to concerns for the continuation of male lineage caused landowners to employ two methods to avoid the bequest of land to female heirs. One method, the "feoffment-to-use" (52), according to Payling, enabled a landowner to disinherit an heiress in favor of a male collateral; the second, the entail, allowed a landowner to dictate the line through which an estate would pass (53). 12 Entails, as Payling explains, enabled a landowner to "settle his lands on himself for life with remainder to a collateral male relative; or [. . .] solve the problem of male succession, not only for his own generation but until all male lines of his family had failed, by settling his lands in tail male" (53). Both methods allowed landowners to give preference to male relatives over females in terms of inheritance. According to Payling, however, landowners did not disinherit female heirs often; instead, they allowed both male and female heirs to inherit. Given the importance of male succession, one must attribute female inheritance to the father’s desire to provide a good dower for his daughter, his respect for his daughter’s right to inherit, or the benefits he knew he would gain by uniting two kin groups in marriage. 13

While Payling suggests that the number of bequests to women implies that people did not make a great attempt to perpetuate the male line (62), female inheritance indicates the coexistence of two paradigms for inheritance, not necessarily a lack of desire to perpetuate male succession. These marriages facilitated the expansion of power and secured alliances, creating better mechanisms of defense in a period when the population was at its lowest; as Lévi-Strauss puts it, the "prime rôle of culture" (32). That is,
strategic marriage unions ensured “the group’s existence as a group, and consequently, in this domain as in all others, to replace chance by organization” (32). In female inheritance one finds that, though agnatic inheritance was typically the privileged practice in the Middle Ages, the need to maintain resources within a family during the famine and the Black Plague in order to survive caused landowners to strategically safeguard their resources through female succession when male heirs did not live. And, as David Herlihy argues, the prominence of agnatic lineage in European society did not supersede bilateral kinship entirely: “[P]atrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral kindreds can exist simultaneously in the same society, usually organized for different purposes” (83).

If succession and preserving one’s landholdings was important in the periods preceding the famine and the Black Death, it became all the more important in the fourteenth century as literature such as “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Sir Degaré,” and Guillaume de Machaut’s writings suggests. In the excerpt from Guillaume’s poem that began this section, the speaker addresses not only general horror and decay caused by the Black Plague – “[T]he air which had been clear and pure/Was now vile, black, and hazy,/Horrible and fetid, putrefied and infected” – but the more local effects of death, lamenting the loss of sons and daughters and, by extension, the absence of lawful heirs. Indeed, the poem moves from discussing the enormous death toll – “Five hundred thousand died as a result” – to discussing the effects on the family, noting that fathers and mothers lacked sons and daughters.
Political Instability, Revolts, and War

[T]he kingdom of England suffered – as a chastisement for its sins – a great and unexpected calamity not experienced by previous ages; and if God, the lord of all mercies, had not suppressed it [. . .] the government of the realm would have been completely destroyed and the episode a source of shame and derision to all peoples. (qtd. in Dobson 131)

Political instability in fourteenth-century England began with the death of King Edward I and the succession of his son, Edward II in 1307. Edward II married Isabella, daughter of Philip IV, King of France from 1285-1314. This marriage would later lead to dispute over the French throne between Philip VI and Edward III and the Hundred Years War.

The Hundred Years War (1337-1453), during which time France and England fought a series of battles with one another, resulted from a culmination of issues including a dispute between Edward III (son of Edward II and Isabella) and Philip VI over succession to the French throne, the manipulation of inheritance laws, and the status of English territories in Aquitaine. In 1324, the French defeated Edward II, King of England, during the War of Saint-Sardos in Gascony; the ability of the French forces and the absence of reinforcements pushed English forces to surrender, leaving only Bordeaux and a narrow strip of coastal land in English possession. Following the battle, the English focused their efforts on recovering lost lands. A few years later, in 1328, King Charles IV of France died without a male heir, leaving his throne vulnerable and causing, as one might expect, a dispute between the claimants to the throne: Edward III, King of England and nephew of Charles IV, and Philip VI, great-grandson to the brother of Philip IV, King of France from 1285-1314. The French argued against Edward III’s claim to the throne, stating royal succession could pass only through the male line and not through
Isabella (Charles IV’s sister) to her son (Edward III); this argument against Edward III’s succession, the French attempted to manipulate medieval inheritance laws that restricted inheritance through the female line to suit personal agendas. Accordingly, the French asserted that succession should pass to Philip VI who eventually succeeded in ascending to the throne. In 1331, Edward relinquished his claim to the throne in exchange for Gascony, a separate fief held by the French crown rather than a territory of England. Dispute erupted again, however, in 1337 when King Philip VI seized the English duchy of Aquitaine “in retaliation for Edward III’s harboring of a condemned Frenchman, Robert of Artois” (Aberth ix). War was then declared between England and France, one that would last until French forces defeated the English at Castillon in France in 1453.

During the Hundred Years War, unrest broke out among the English people. Several factors contributed to the English Rising (otherwise known as the Peasants’ Revolt) in England in the fourteenth century, but one might argue its seeds lie in the economic chaos caused by the Hundred Years War. While the actual revolt occurred in 1381, one can trace its causes, at least in part, to the Statute of Labourers of 1351, which aimed to curb wages and restrict mobility of labor following the Black Death. The plague greatly reduced the labor force of England, making it possible for laborers to demand increased wages and better work conditions. Consequently, the Statute of Labourers proclaimed that “servants, both men and women, should be obliged to serve in return for the salaries and wages which were customary (in those places where they ought to serve) during the twentieth year of the present king’s reign (1346-7) or five or six years previously” (qtd. in Dobson 64). In effect, the Statute of Labourers reissued the 1349 Ordinance of Labourers (a ruling that fixed wages to the levels in 1346) and fixed wages
in such a way that peasants could not benefit from the labor demand following the Black Death without risking imprisonment. In addition to labor restrictions, the tremendous expenditures of the Hundred Years War caused Richard II, Edward III’s grandson and successor, to implement several forms of taxation including the poll tax (tax per head) of 1380, perhaps the final factor that incited revolt among the disgruntled English people.

As a poem entitled “Tax has Tenet Us Alle” proclaims:

Tax has tenet us alle,

*probat hoc mors tot validorum*;
(Death of so many worthy folk proves it)
The kyng therof hade smalle,

*ffuit in manibus cupidorum.*
(It was in the hands of greedy persons)
Hit hade harde honsalle,

*dans causam fine dolorum*
(Providing cause in the end for grief)
Revrawnce nede most falle,

*propter peccata malorum.*
(Because of the sins of the wicked) (Dean 147)

Historians such as John Aberth claim that, in addition to the taxes imposed on the English people, the ways in which landlords recovered and reimposed tenure after the plague resulted in tension that also contributed to the revolt. The disparate occupation of manors following the Black Death (some fully occupied and others vacant) created situations of inequality, resulting in servile conditions ranging from “unfree status in which the serf had absolutely no legal rights and had to perform all kinds of services for his lord, to free tenantry in which the peasant had no obligation other than to pay rent” (Aberth 141). This inequality likely created conflict and resentment among the peasant class who, in turn, demanded of King Richard II that all people pay rent rather than pay homage to a
lord (Aberth 141). Ultimately, the people and their spokesman, Wat Tyler, wanted “freedom from arbitrary taxes, fines, and rents that restricted not only the movements of their persons but also of their lands and chattels” (Aberth 142): “nolentes lege domari; (unwilling to yield to the law)/Nede they fre be most./vel nollent pacificari (or they would not be peaceful)” (“Tax,” Dean 26-28); that is, the people would not surrender their fight until free from unjust taxation.

Though the fourteenth century was not the first to experience catastrophe, it stands out as a century of turmoil, one with sequential, at times devastating, crises and little or no reprieve. For that reason, one might study the period not only as one in a larger history, but as a point in history unlike any other. From this historical point of rupture emerged the popular literary genre of romance. Romance, of course, was not born out of the fourteenth century; it existed long before and long after the period. Fourteenth-century England did, however, see a flourishing of “popular” romance that stands apart from its French contemporaries and earlier analogues in its form, content, and the motifs it manipulates. Fourteenth-century, “popular,” Middle English romance concerns itself not with damsels in distress, unrequited love, and questing knights (though these are often elements of “popular” Middle English romance) but with socio-political issues and dangers within the domestic sphere. One can reasonably ascribe these developments in the “popular” romance genre, then, to the cultural crises concurrent with their composition. Fourteenth-century, “popular,” Middle English romance emerges from a cultural imaginary affected by the Great Famine, Black Death, and political instability. Accordingly, the romances respond to the effects of these crises by depicting anxiety over issues of inheritance, marriage, and class structure.
In these “popular” romances, the form of the narrative, that is the rupture and resolution structure, stems from a creative imagination that seeks order during a period of social unrest: while the content of the romances is often chaotic with various battles, quests, and threats, the form imposes order by demanding the text have a happy, sutured ending. Regardless of the action of the narrative, these texts always begin in a state of order, move through chaos, and, ultimately, return to a state of order in the end.

In his study of the structure of romance, Northrop Frye theorizes an archetypal schema in an attempt to create a “synoptic view of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism” (Anatomy 3). Frye posits that criticism must have a certain quality that allows it to function as a systematic study: “just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature,” explains Frye, “is not a piled aggregate of ‘works,’ but an order of words” (Anatomy 17). This “order of words,” according to Frye, lies in formulaic unities, in archetypes. Frye argues that the archetypes for literature exist in “an order of words” that provide criticism with a conceptual framework rooted in the imagination: “The imagination,” Frye suggests, “is the constructive power of the mind, the power of building unities out of units” (Secular 36). That is, Frye suggests that the imagination as a “constructive power” (Secular 36) produces convention: “the formulaic unit, of phrase or story, is the cornerstone of the creative imagination [... ]” (Secular 36).

Regarding romance of the Middle Ages, Frye focuses primarily on the structure of the quest romance that surrounds a hero and his adventures. The quest romance, according to Frye, has a threefold structure: “the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle [... ]; and the exaltation of the hero”
Frye refers to each of these stages respectively as “agon or conflict, the pathos or death-struggle, and the anagnorisis or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict” (Anatomy 187); Agon, according to Frye, “is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvelous adventures” (Anatomy 192).

Indeed, romance is, like a fairy tale, a fantastic and marvelous space in which knights battle dragons, dwarfs, and giants, magic rings save lives, and supernatural occurrences such as shape-shifting take place. However, while the threefold structure of these texts remains fairly consistent from romance to romance, I would expound on Frye’s argument to stress that the textual circumstances in which the marvelous events and threats present themselves differ and that these differences, though seemingly superficial, are directly related to the cultural conditions of the romances’ emergence. Agon, while certainly the basis for romance, is culturally specific: in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, written for an aristocratic, court culture, mezura (a balance between the private life of desire and the public sphere of duty) functions as the source of agon. In contrast, several of the “popular,” fourteenth-century, Middle English romances depict issues of inheritance, class struggle, and overall dangers in the domestic sphere and the nuclear family as the source of conflict. Though the threats presented in these romances do not necessarily reflect famine, plague, and war, they nonetheless portray the domestic space as a dangerous place, one threatened in actuality by crisis. During the plague especially, the domestic space was often the center of crisis where people watched their family members die and where infected people were forcefully confined.
While Frye focuses specifically on archetypes such as the questing knight to understand romance, this project seeks to examine the “popular,” Middle English romance genre and its use of *agon* in the cultural context of fourteenth-century England. In “popular,” Middle English romance, the cultural circumstances of fourteenth-century England present themselves in both the content and form of these domestic narratives: content in the issues the romances address and form through the rupture/resolution structure of the texts. Middle English romance, with its use of the rupture/resolution formula, inscribes the structure of the domestic romance narratives with tonality of anxiety caused by the crises of fourteenth-century England, especially the demographic crisis. These narratives draw on formulae to express and resolve these cultural anxieties in the fantastic space of romance where anything can happen.

The forthcoming chapters will focus on the literature of fourteenth-century England, specifically the Middle English romances often labeled “family,” “domestic,” and “popular.” The first chapter will discuss the emergence of “domestic romances” as byproducts of the cultural tension caused by the aforementioned crises and will examine the historical existence of the romances in addition to their probable audiences. After all, understanding literature of the Middle Ages is, as Derek Pearsall points out, “a matter of cultural history, of trying to understand the circumstances in which [. . .] [it] was produced, the functions it served, and the part it played in the social and cultural life of the period” (37). In a sense, this study seeks to expound upon the discussion Charles Muscatine began in *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* in which he discusses the relation between crisis and the works of Chaucer, the *Pearl* poet, and Langland and the connection between literary study and cultural history, how works “fit into a full and
complex sense of their time [. . .]" (25). Chapter one will examine “Sir Degaré,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Athelston,” “Chevalere Assigne,” and “Le Bone Florence of Rome” (all fourteenth-century romances) to elucidate the way these romances, through the cultural issues they depict, respond to a larger question of social disruption caused by demographic crisis. Moreover, the chapter will argue that the aims of these romances, which depict various socio-cultural issues of class, inheritance, and family unity differ from those of their more critically valued French ancestors and English contemporaries and, consequently, criticism must, as Northrop Frye explains, take a dual approach that turns both “toward the structure of literature and [. . .] toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature” (Critical Path 25). One must, that is, take into account the cultural circumstances of literary production and its relation to the form and content of these texts; as Frye notes, “[l]iterature is a part of a social process; hence that process as a whole forms the genuine context of literature” (Critical Path 19).

The second chapter will advance the study of “domestic” romances by discussing the function of incest and rape as literary motifs in five fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romances: “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Emaré,” “Sir Degaré,” “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” and “Sir Orfeo.” In each of these romances, the rape and incest motifs function in slightly different ways. In “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” the incest motif presents itself through a father’s over-possessive behavior, which leads to social and textual disruption through clandestine marriage and separation of the family; in “Emaré,” one finds incest in a father’s explicit desire for his daughter which, in turn, results in her expulsion; “Sir Degaré” presents rape in the form of sexual violence that results in the
birth of the hero for which the romance is named and his subsequent adventures; in “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” multiple rape attempts by a brother-in-law, a lord, and a sea captain result in the heroine’s adventures and turmoil throughout the text; and, in a slightly different vein, “Sir Orfeo” presents rape through the fairy king’s abduction of Orfeo’s wife which, in turn, results in both the separation of husband and wife and political disruption. In each of these romances, incest and rape work as points of rupture that complicate the texts, demanding the narratives advance to a point of suture, or resolution. Chapter two will argue that the catastrophic events of the fourteenth century are the conditions that contributed to the rupture/resolution form to these “popular” romances. Likewise, the rupture/resolution form represents cultural tension caused during this calamitous period.
Chapter 1
The Emergence of “Popular” Middle English Romance

The very title of Charles Muscatine’s book, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer*, speaks to the general critical view of Middle English texts and not only places the works of Chaucer in a position of prominence, but identifies an entire period by a single author, paying little attention to the numerous other authors and texts written during the same period. The title of Muscatine’s book exemplifies the all-too-common, narrow critical focus scholars have taken with regard to non-Chaucerian, Middle English romances. For the most part, Middle English romances are — with the exception of, perhaps, those written by Gower, Chaucer, the *Pearl* poet, and Malory — undervalued, under read, and understudied. Traditionally, Middle English romances are, to borrow the words of Stephen Knight, “the ugly ducklings of medieval English studies” (99). For decades critics have regarded the romances as formulaic, bawdy, unsophisticated, cannibalized works and have negatively labeled them “popular.” Until the recent work of critics such as Stephen Knight, Ad Putter, Jane Gilbert, Elizabeth Archibald, and Nicola McDonald to name a few, scholars continued to devalue “popular” Middle English romances and favor their French antecedents, or contemporary texts, deemed of a higher aesthetic quality despite popular romance’s status as “medieval England’s most popular secular genre” (McDonald 1). Modern criticism tends to measure Middle English romance by an aesthetic criterion that values the life-like presence of the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, though not a romance, and the psychological interiority one finds in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and fails to recognize the complexities found in Middle English romance: that is, this aesthetic judgment values the splendor and
romantic ideals of Arthur's court and the realistic portraits of the people who travel to Canterbury, the interplay between the various social ranks, and the tales the characters tell. "Popular" romances, on the other hand, have, as Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert note, "been characterized above all negatively, by their failure to meet such desirable literary criteria as formal complexity and conceptual sophistication. They have also been defined by their audience, similarly considered second-rate by comparison with that which sponsored and enjoyed the quality works we prize today" (20). The supposed non-aristocratic audience attracted by "popular" romance, romance's use of convention, and its explicit commitment to please, to tell a tale of "mykylr myrght" ("Emaré," Laskaya and Salisbury 20), have led critics to regard these narratives as substandard and "unworthy of the kind of close reading, as well as historically and theoretically informed analysis, that we regularly afford so-called elite medieval English art" (McDonald 2).

When approaching "popular" Middle English romances, specifically those written in the fourteenth-century one must realize that the aims of these romances, and thus their tropes, content, and form, differ from those of their earlier analogues or renowned contemporaries (though concerns of these earlier audiences may inevitably carry over in retransmission of source material); they do not aim strictly as the romances of Chrétien de Troyes or the lais of Marie de France to entertain the ladies of an aristocratic court, to debate the existence of love in marriage, or to discuss the behavior admired in a good knight and the issue of mezura. Instead, the romances depict various concerns specific to fourteenth-century culture such as inheritance, marriage, death, and social fluidity, suggesting that the texts concern themselves more pointedly with the cultural circumstances surrounding their emergence. While these texts aim, on one level, to
entertain, they also function as expressions of cultural anxiety and validate the various anxieties experienced by their wide audience in the fourteenth century.

More than one hundred Middle English romances remain from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries and, of the extant romances, Jonathan Severs ascribes more than half, fifty-five in addition to those written by Chaucer and Gower, to the fourteenth century. Though one must assume that a greater number of Middle English romances existed in the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries than what we know today, it is surprising that so few of the later romances have survived, especially when one considers that the later fifteenth century (from which only forty-two romances are extant, according to Severs) saw the invention of the printing press which gave people greater opportunity to circulate texts. The very prominence of the soi-disant “popular” romances begs a more thorough examination of the texts and demands that one question the cultural circumstances that allow for their existence. This chapter does not seek to analyze the entire corpus of extant romances from the fourteenth century, but to discuss the relation between “popular” romance and the conditions of fourteenth-century England to elucidate the way these romances occupied a literary space not inferior to but different from the more celebrated and studied romances. This chapter will examine fourteenth-century Middle English romances, specifically those centered around the family or that present threats in the domestic sphere (romances often labeled “popular”), in their historical context: the crises that plagued England in the fourteenth century, the social conditions that allow, and indeed contribute to, the proliferation of the family/domestic romance genre. The calamitous events of the fourteenth century, of course, did not bring forth Middle English “popular” romance out of nothing – romance existed long before
the fourteenth century and in several languages—
but they were the conditions of emergence of a large number of the extant romances, a larger number than what survives in English from the thirteenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth centuries.

To understand “popular,” Middle English romance, then one must examine it in relation to the circumstances of its historical existence. One must, as Northrop Frye writes, “realize that the ultimate source of a poem [or text] is not so much the individual poet as the social situation from which he springs, and of which he is the spokesman and the medium” (Critical Path 18). The following analysis of “popular,” Middle English romance seeks to extend Frye’s discussion and examine domestic romance narratives in the context of fourteenth-century England which, in turn, will give meaning to the texts and their structure: though the subject matter of the romances may or may not have changed significantly in the fourteenth century, the conditions of their emergence certainly transformed the mode of their existence, giving them a different cultural function. Much of the negative criticism of “popular” Middle English romance stems from an inclination to measure its quality by its French antecedents or by works of their renowned contemporaries (often court poets), such as Chaucer or Gower, without recognizing that these romances do not serve the same purpose. One cannot criticize a genre for not succeeding in what it does not intend to accomplish. Though “popular,” fourteenth-century, Middle English romance moves in a literary space similar to that of its French ancestors and more celebrated contemporaries, it does not aim to position itself alongside these texts: as outlets for the expression of culturally specific anxiety, “popular” romance aims to suit the needs and desires of its contemporary audiences. Likewise, romance serves to contain and resolve the anxieties of the period.
Most Middle English romances, though they may have French analogues, pay less attention to courtly behavior and do not center on motifs such as the hapless damsel in distress or unrequited love as, for example, the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Instead, Middle English romances, though they often include knightly quests, battles, and damsels in distress, tend to take the family (typically the nuclear family) as their subjects, address dangers within the domestic sphere, and devote more attention to socio-political issues. Influenced by the crises of the fourteenth century, these texts conflate the elements of the more “elite” romances with the cultural issues they take as their focus. While knights may encounter giants, dwarfs, and dragons, the trials they face often involve the family: the heroes of these romances tend to find themselves married to their mothers, in battle with their fathers, or threatened by the fathers of the women they desire. Similarly, while heroines may suffer distress, these women lack mothers, find themselves faced with jealous mothers-in-law and possessive fathers, and seldom does a noble knight rescue them. When thinking of the threatening domestic sphere presented in these romances, one need only recall that Machaire does not battle warrior knights nor is Canace a damsel in distress: instead, the two must face the dangers of living in close quarters with one another. In these domestic or family-centered Middle English romances, “there is no need,” as Joanne Charbonneau points out, “to venture far afield for adventures and threatening presences: these narratives find potential horrors, dangers, acts of betrayal, injustices, and even plotted murders not only close to home, but also within the domestic sphere itself” (252).

That many of the so-called “popular” romances should address issues within the family, at the center of the home, is understandable and appropriate given the way crises
throughout the fourteenth century disrupted families and, similarly, that an audience affected by these crises would have found domestic romances particularly meaningful. Though such romances do not necessarily depict families affected by famine, plague, drought, and war, they do portray the domestic and private life as threatening and surrounded by tension and anxiety. These texts, moreover, not only interrogate the “norms that order and regulate our lives” as Nicola McDonald has noted, (17) but represent, through their subject matter, the crises of fourteenth-century England – the ills of society. Though difficult to categorize the romances due to the diversity of their subject matter, nearly half of the fifty-five romances that survive from the fourteenth century (excluding the tales of Arthur, which could fall under the domestic heading, and those written by Chaucer and Gower which one should examine within the greater corpus of the authors’ works) involve family or center around threats that surface in the domestic sphere. In contrast, one might classify only three romances that survive from the thirteenth century as domestic or family romances, four of the forty-two from the fifteenth century, and four of the eleven from the sixteenth century. Considering the disparate number of romances that survive from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, one must make conjectures cautiously. However, the overwhelming number of domestic romances (and romances in general) that survive from the fourteenth century in comparison to the number that survive from the thirteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries strongly suggests this genre, and the domestic romances especially, held, as textual and discursive forms of cultural expression, a place of particular importance during this tumultuous period.
The demographic crisis caused by the famine and the Black Death saw the emergence of several “domestic” romances (including “Sir Degaré,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” and “Chevalere Assigne”) that reflect cultural concerns including those of heirless landowners. As Stephen Knight notes, “For them [landlords and their families] the romances detail a whole range of threats to their tenure or power [. . .]” (Knight 101). Given the unstable state of land ownership and the lack of male heirs to inherit, it is not surprising that the English gentry, as Harriet Hudson explains, had an “obsessive concern for the preservation and extension of property and the advancement of family through marriage” (81), nor is it surprising that texts that center around these concerns emerged in England in the fourteenth century. According to Charbonneau, in the years before the Plague, “Only 60% of landowners had sons, 20% had daughters only, and 20% were childless. [. . .] Conditions worsened as the fourteenth century progressed so that less than half of the landowners had sons to inherit” (247). These figures, as Payling suggests, point to a high rate of failure in male succession even during stable demographic conditions (52). To make matters worse, the estates of the gentry in the later Middle Ages, as Harriet Hudson notes, were unstable, “fragmented and refocused as they were formed” (81). Consequently, landowners of the later Middle Ages had significant grounds for concern over safeguarding their resources; when one considers how quickly people seized the property of heirless landowner or landowners who could not withstand the hardships of the famine, the reasons for concern become all the more evident.

“Sir Degaré,” composed in or around London during the years of the famine and the sheep and oxen epidemics, addresses issues of inheritance caused by demographic
crisis and, thus, directly connects to the cultural circumstances surrounding its composition. The story opens in a state of imbalance with the King of Brittany who has no wife and only one heir, “a maidenchild fre and fair” (20). The early mention of the absence of a male heir suggests anxiety over issues of inheritance. Despite the numerous requests for his daughter’s hand in marriage from kings, princes, and dukes, the king refuses proposals from all men except the one who can defeat him (the king) in battle, an absurd demand when one considers “So strong he was of bon and blod” (18) that no man can overcome him. Though the king’s stipulation for the hand of his daughter suggests a desire to keep her for himself, to have her take her mother’s place, his stipulation also signals concern over losing all of his resources with the marriage of his daughter and only heir. The king’s ludicrous demand of his daughter’s suitors, then, a task in which he knows each man will fail, serves as a means to maintain his power by eliminating the possibility for his daughter to marry. The king’s formal challenge for the hand of his daughter reiterates the potential loss of his power if his daughter marries. The man-at-arms explains:

‘Yif ani man were of arms so bold
That with the King justi wold,
He scholde have in marriage
His dowter and his heritage,
That kingdom god and fair,
For he had non other hair.’ (438-444)

These lines explicitly address two noteworthy and interconnected issues pertaining to lineage and inheritance in the Middle Ages. First, the reference to the king giving up his
kingdom and his heritage exemplifies the transfer of money and property from one group of kin to another through the marriage of a daughter. Second, these lines express an anxiety over the king having only a daughter to inherit his property which she will, inevitably, take to her husband’s family once she marries. Although the king ostensibly offers his daughter in marriage to the man who can defeat him, he implicitly seeks to keep her and his power through his absurd challenge; the challenge, thus, transforms the folk motif of the impossible task into a problem specifically tied to fourteenth-century concerns. By not arranging a union for his daughter, the king frustrates the possibility for her marriage and retains power rather than bequeathing it to her and her husband. While the king likely would have benefited from uniting his daughter in an exogamous marriage, here the text expresses an anxiety over the transfer of property which, inevitably, involved some loss of power.

“Sir Degaré” exemplifies an anxiety over female inheritance and the potential downfall that results from a woman’s rule when Degaré stumbles upon a castle in the woods governed by a woman. Prior to Degaré’s departure after a night’s rest at her castle, the woman laments her misfortunes to Degaré, explaining that:

‘Mi fader was a riche baroun,
And hadde mani a tour and toun.
He ne hadde no child but me;
Ich was his air of his cuntré.’ (872-875)

Consequently, the woman succeeds her father but, incapable of ruling the country, finds herself at the mercy of a giant who kills all of her men. The woman’s inability to govern the country and its people left to her by her father signals anxiety over female succession.
Cheryl Colopy has noted the way this woman’s inability to rule echoes the anxiety over the lack of a male heir expressed earlier in the romance. This anxiety, however, does not signal simply a “dangerous situation [. . . ]” (Colopy 36) related to inheritance but relates directly to the threats to succession caused by the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century. Just as the number of daughters who survived their fathers increased during the demographic crisis, the text places a woman in the position of an heir and, in so doing, emphasizes the absence of males to inherit. This woman’s inability to rule, moreover, problematizes the King of Brittany’s attempt to keep his daughter from marrying which, if he is successful, may result in a similar situation. The text, here, suggests the benefits of arranging a highborn marriage for one’s daughter given the absence of a male heir.

This anxiety over the absence of a male heir surfaces again when an earl offers Degaré his land and property as a reward for killing a dragon: he “proffered him all that he hade,/Rentes, tresor, and eke lond” (390-391). Although the text does not explicitly state the earl has no heir, one can reasonably base such a conjecture on his intended bequest of “al that he hade,” an unacceptable bequest if he had a male heir. The earl exceeds the typical rewards for knightly services (such as some money, some property, or some livestock) and, instead, offers Degaré all that he owns. The earl’s hasty offer points to his intent to adopt Degaré as a surrogate heir; his offer, moreover, suggests a desperate need for male heirs at a time when, historically, the famine caused a drastic decrease in the population and male heirs were scarce.

“Sir Eglamour of Artois,” like “Sir Degaré,” focuses on the absence of male heirs, beginning with an earl who has no wife and “had nevyr child but on,/That was a dowghtir, white as fom,/hys ryche eyr schulde be” (25-27). Harriet Hudson places the
composition of “Sir Eglamour” in Yorkshire which, in 1350, experienced a significant population decline due to the famine and the Black Death; indeed, the population of York, according to J. N. Bartlett, “was [. . .] at its lowest point between 1300 and 1550” (21). Accordingly, “Sir Eglamour of Artois” reflects the demographic crisis that surrounded its composition and depicts landowners with female or no male heirs. As Charbonneau notes,

This poem presents an even gloomier picture of life than the realities of the late 1300s since there is only one son in all of the families mentioned in the poem: the Earl of Artas has only one daughter and no wife to further the line; of the three kings in the poem, none has sons and only one has a daughter; and the Emperor of Rome has only one daughter. Maintaining family continuity and keeping land and estates in the patrilineal line are thus on the verge of collapse. (248)

This exaggeration of the circumstances of fourteenth-century life, dramatizing the absence of male heirs by depicting three kings without a single male to inherit, stems from an anxiety in the fourteenth century caused by the demographic crisis. This “even gloomier picture of life” both reflects and confirms the cultural anxiety caused by the catastrophic effects of these crises.

Like the King of Brittany, the Earl of Artois attempts to maintain control over his resources by hindering the chances for his daughter to marry: indeed, when Eglamour approaches the earl to ask if his daughter, Cristabell, is marriageable or spoken for, the earl replies “So God me save,/I knowe non [mate] that hyr schall have” (208-209). When Eglamour expresses his desire to pursue Cristabell, the earl, like the King of Brittany,
stipulates impossible challenges in which Eglamour must succeed in order to gain Cristabell's hand in marriage: the Earl of Artois tells Eglamour that he may have his daughter provided he successfully completes a series of tests (slaying a deer, a vicious boar, and a dragon), all of which are equally as difficult and threatening as engaging in battle with King of Brittany. The earl's challenges indicate he does not intend to give Cristabell up and, by extension, point to his desire to maintain control over his land and wealth by maintaining control over his daughter.

This same anxiety suggested by the earl's challenges occurs when Eglamour, in the course of his quest to fight the boar, meets the King of Sidon. When the king discovers Eglamour has killed the boar, he expresses his distress over a giant who terrorizes his country and threatens to take his daughter, his only heir. Once Eglamour defeats the giant, the king offers to him as a reward his daughter and his country:

‘Syr Aunterus,’ he seyd, ‘be Seynt Jame,
Here shalt thou be kynge!
Tomorn schall I crowne the,
And thou shal wedde my dowghtyr fre
With a full ryche ryng.’ (593-597)

The king’s offer of his daughter, Organate, along with his land and even his title signals not only his gratitude for saving his land, people, and daughter, but his desperate need for a male heir as well. Though handing over his daughter and property would likely result in loss, the text suggests, instead, that Eglamour would fill the place of a surrogate heir. That the king is not only willing to adopt Eglamour as his son but immediately relinquish his title and power points to his despair. Furthermore, the king’s offer exemplifies the
way a young man and his family stood to gain from the hardships of others during
demographic crisis: Eglamour, if he marries Organate, stands to gain the king’s land and
wealth offered as a dower. Likewise, the king’s offer of his land and title signals a need
of landowners with only female heirs to strategically plan marriage unions for their
daughters or snatch up the most noble potential sons-in-law possible. The decline in the
male population during the demographic crisis not only hindered a landowner’s ability to
maintain his resources but also hindered his ability to marry his daughter to a highborn
family.

When the Earl of Artois expels his daughter and her illegitimate son, Degrebelle,
as punishment for her surreptitious relationship with Eglamour, the text reveals again
resonances of the importance of male succession and an anxiety over the absence of male
heirs. When a Griffin abducts Degrebell from the boat carrying him and his mother and
delivers him to Israel, the childless King of Israel, the third landowner presented in the
text without a male heir, adopts him as his heir: “The kyng of Israel made hym
knight/And prynce with hys honed” (1001-1002). The king’s lack of children reiterates
the concern over inheritance and the subsequent difficulty in maintaining resources
without a male to inherit; his adoption of Degrebell suggests a real need to solve these
intertwined issues and a desire to strengthen the agnatic and, perhaps, the patrilineal
systems of inheritance.

“Chevelere Assigne,” composed in the mid to late fourteenth century in the East
Midlands, introduces the subject of heirless landowners during or shortly after the first
outbreak of the plague in that area; the concerns over inheritance presented in this
romance, then, mirror the anxieties of people in this region affected by the plague. The
romance begins with a man's lament over not having children and his consequential distress over not having an heir to whom he can bequeath his property: King Oryens bemoans: “That he hadde no chylde to chevenne his londis, /But to be lordeles of his whenne he þe lyf lafte; /And þat honged in his herte, I heete þe forsothe” (15-18).

Again, the king laments not having children when he sees a woman attending to her twins and “turned hym þenne, and teres letter he falle” (24) and asks his wife “‘Se þe þe sonder pore woman, how þat she is pyned /With twynlengess two?’” (26-27). As a result of both the king’s prayers and his wife’s sharp tongue, the queen conceives the same day they see the woman with the twins. Interestingly, the queen gives birth to not just one child but six boys and one girl, a superfluous, almost dangerous, number of heirs. That the queen gives birth to six boys and only one girl is significant. This very striking and absurd superfluity dramatizes the absence of male heirs while it simultaneously attempts to impose resolution on the text through procreation; fertility, as Frye notes, serves as a form of deliverance “over the waste land” (Anatomy 193). Through the birth of seven children, then, the romance takes great pains to textually resolve, or contain, the problems caused by the depleted male population.

If anxiety over the absence of an heir surfaces in the king’s grief before his wife gives birth, it is all the more evident when she exposes the children. Ashamed at giving birth to seven children simultaneously after she asserted a woman cannot give birth to more than one child without the children having different fathers, Queen Betrys separates the king from his heirs when she orders one of her men to drown the new-born children. Moving from a superfluous number of heirs to no heir at all, the text underscores the very real and sudden absence of heirs to inherit. Like “Sir Degaré” and “Sir Eglamour of
Artiois,” however, the text ultimately reunites the king with his children; divine intervention spares the king from the task of naming an heir and an angel chooses one for him. The heir rectifies all, and divine providence and patrilineal succession prevail.

In addition to concerns over inheritance, “popular” Middle English romance addresses socio-political issues and issues of class during a period which, due to the demographic crisis, saw a breakdown of class demarcation. “Athelston” (1353-1380), for instance, conveys the possibility for people to rise to positions of power that they would not otherwise have. When Athelston, a messenger, inherits the position of king, he places three of his fellow messengers (Wymound, Egeland, and Alryke) into positions of power as well: he appoints Wymound as Earl of Dover, bestows upon Egeland the position of Earl of Stone as well as his sister, Edyff, and selects Alryke as Archbishop of Canterbury, seemingly incongruous appointments for common messengers.

One observes a similar, yet less obvious, rise in status in the loyal messenger, named Athelstane. The very name of the messenger, so close to that of the king, signals his noble attributes; indeed, the narrator of the text draws attention to the similarities between the two characters: “A messanger was aufftyr sent/To speke with the kyng./I wene he bar his owne name” (182-184). In addition, while the text initially refers to Athelstane as a “foundelyng” (186), he, in a matter of fourteen lines, becomes a “noble man” (199) instead; “true nobility [in this romance] is not associated with rank and social status, but rather with moral character” (Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury 343). Nobility and moral character in the cases of Athelston and Athelstane conceal the rise in class and make it more acceptable by giving the characters attributes deserving of the fates the text awards them.
In “Chevelere Assigne,” before Enyas becomes heir to the throne he must first defend his mother against his evil grandmother. The boy, however, knows nothing of courtly behavior or knightly pursuits due to his humble upbringing (raised by a hermit):

“‘3e, kanste þou, fader, enseme me how þat I shall fy 3te?’” (212). When the child prepares for combat, he questions a knight in order to gain the knowledge of knightly behavior and pursuits that he lacks:

‘What beeste is þis,’ quod the cilde, ‘þat I shall on hove?’

‘Hit is called an hors,’ quod þe knyste, ‘a good and an abull.’

‘Why teeth he ren?’ quoth þe childe. ‘Wyll he ete nosth elles?

And what is þat on his bakke, of byrthe or on bounden?’

‘Nay, þat in his mowth men kallen a brydell,

And that a sadell on his bake, þat þou shalt in sytte.’

‘And what hevy kyrtell is þis with holes so thykke

And þis holowe on my here? [. . .]’

‘an helme men kallen þat on and an hawberke þat other.’ (288-296)

The young boy, though the son of a king, knows nothing of knightly conduct due to his simple upbringing. The ignorant child, however, rises in social status when he defeats Malkedras, his grandmother’s servant, and proves his true nobility. Though the text seemingly indicates the importance of maintaining one’s born social status by having the boy assume a position rightfully his by birth, it, nonetheless, presents the possibility for class fluidity by placing Enyas in a low social rank and having him move from one class to another. The text underscores the boy’s lower social rank as the ward of a hermit and draws attention to issues such as his lack of courtly knowledge. The text does not depict
the boy as naïve, innocent youth but, instead, deliberately juxtaposes his knowledge with
that of a trained knight. Moreover, the questions the boy asks the knight—“What beeste
is pis,’ quod the cilde, ‘pat I shall on hove?’”—indicate he lacks even the very basic
knowledge of court culture. The boy’s rise in status, thus, points to a rise in social class;
the boy’s rightful claim to his birth rights massage the actual rise in social status.

Though both “Chevalere Assigne” and “Athelston” focus on the ascendancy of
those with royal blood, one cannot ignore that both Enyas and Athelston were at one time
of a much lower social rank and, indeed, served socially menial positions. Composed
during a period of class struggle with the changing value of peasant labor, the slow
decline of the feudal system, and the emergence of the merchant class, these texts display
a certain element of class consciousness one may attribute to cultural crisis and change;
through the ability of these lower class heroes to ascend in social status, the texts suggest
the potential for social fluidity and, perhaps, the shift in social status that took place as
the poor became landowners and the previous landowners died off. As W.R.J. Barron
notes, the heroes of such romances “pass effortlessly from one social level to another,
offering sympathetic figures for self-identification [. . .]” (85). “[S]elf-identification”
takes place on the part of the romance’s audience who would likely have understood
these texts as representations of slow breakdown of class demarcation that occurred in the
fourteenth century.

Though issues of inheritance and class struggle present themselves in these
“popular” Middle English romances, the texts often devote attention to issues in the
family and the home. These romances depict the domestic space as threatening and
surrounded by tension and anxiety that suggests disruption of the family, a situation
consistent with the social unrest of fourteenth-century England. In “Le Bone Florence of Rome” (North Midlands, late fourteenth century) and other similar variations of the Constance legend, father-daughter incest typically poses the prominent threat within the home, though in “Le Bone Florence,” the desires of Florence’s brother-in-law (Mylys), both incestuous and political, create a threatening domestic space. In “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” Mylys’ jealousy over his brother’s throne and wife moves him to usurp both: “Thys heritage to me wyll falle/My brodur comy^ neuyr a gayne/I wyll wedde the yonge bride” (1067-1069) \(^2\); the usurpation, however, does not take place on the battlefield, as might happen in French romance, but within domestic, or private, spaces such as the chamber and the usurper does not use weapons but, instead, uses guile. After Mylys takes over his brother’s throne, he attempts to marry Florence. When Florence refuses to wed, he locks Florence in her chamber with knights guarding her door; Florence’s room, her private space, then, becomes a prison. As a last resort to conquer Florence, Mylys, after his brother, Emere, returns home from war, leads Florence into the woods where he builds a wood shed and creates an artificial, private space in which to rape her: “A logge made that traytur wyck/vndue nethe a tree/There he wolde haue leyn hur by” (1436-1438). \(^3\) Though Mylys could accost Florence anywhere, he chooses to do so in an enclosed, private building. This textual move makes the otherwise open space of the woods an artificially, private sphere, reminding one that the domestic sphere is a threatening space.

Similarly, at a later point in the text, a knight (Machary), out of lust and then out of revenge, penetrates the private confines of Florence’s chamber, making that domestic space venerable to threats of sexual predation, murder, and deceit. Initially, the knight
spies on Florence until opportunity arises for him to sneak into her chamber and attempt to rape her; Florence, however, manages to wound the knight and narrowly escape. Out of revenge, the knight again steals into the chamber she shares with her host’s daughter, kills the daughter, and frames Florence for the assault. Just as Mylys creates a threatening space by building a shed and attempting to rape Florence in it, so does Machary’s attempted rape make the chamber ominous.

Again, the text depicts the domestic, private space as a threatening place where horrific things happen when Mylys and Florence take shelter at a hermit’s abode. Angered by the food with which the hermit provides him, Mylys assaults his host and “In at the dore he hym bete/And sethyn fyre vpon hym sete/Ferre fro euery towne” (1480-1482); for Mylys to violate his host by beating and setting fire to him is odious and abominable. Here, the text depicts not only a dangerous domestic space but one destroyed by the threat. The physicality of this moment as Mylys sets the man’s body on fire, moves the threat away from distant, supernatural tropes such as dragons (though menacing in certain contexts) and makes the presence of the threat all the more real.

Each of these “popular” Middle English romances addresses specific issues, such as inheritance or class, attributable to anxiety that stemmed from cultural crisis in the fourteenth century. Similarly, the threatening domestic space presented in texts such as “Le Bone Florence of Rome” (and others discussed in greater detail in chapter 2) reflect disruption of the family caused by crisis. The issues these romances depict suggest fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romance concerned itself primarily with contemporary cultural concerns and, in so doing, differ from their French ancestors and “elite” contemporaries which depict issues of specific concern for their audiences. These
romances contain resonances, often complex and subtle, of cultural issues during this cataclysmic period. As John Hatcher points out, “many [authors] were aware that their audiences were widening and deepening, and that in these perilous times it was appropriate for their writing to assume a more direct social function, with description, instruction and exhortation taking precedence over entertainment” (13). In turn, these “popular,” domestic romances served as outlets for the exploration of multiple threats or anxieties regarding marriage, class structure, systems of inheritance, and the family that affected all of English society.

The next chapter will argue that the structure of fourteenth-century Middle English romances (specifically the romances that concern themselves with the nuclear family and the domestic space) and the rape and incest motifs romance writers employ to create threatening domestic spaces. This chapter will argue that the use of these motifs does not necessarily signal an unsophisticated reliance on formula as some critics have argued but have textual purpose: the fixed structure of these texts as well as their motifs move the romances from chaos to a point of suture, or actualization, ultimately resolving the disrupted textual world through extreme, often incongruous, measures. Placing the rupture/resolution structure of these romances in the socio-cultural context of fourteenth-century England elucidates the concrete and powerful meaning the texts must have held for their audiences as the world of romance, despite its often supernatural elements, becomes consonant with the world of the fourteenth-century audience.
Chapter 2
Rupture and Resolution

The cultural conditions that surrounded the emergence of fourteenth-century "popular" Middle English romance also influenced its structure, from the motifs the romances employ to the formulaic shape they often take. This chapter seeks to bring the historical focus of the preceding chapters together with a literary focus in order to discuss the rape and incest motifs used in fourteenth-century domestic romances and to consider these motifs in relation to their historical existence. Such an examination elucidates the way the form of these romances reflects the circumstances of the culture in which they were composed. To that end, this chapter returns to Charles Muscatine's question regarding how literary works "fit into a full and complex sense of their time [. . .]" (25).

Many of the so-called "popular," domestic, Middle English romances focus on issues within the family (such as marriage and inheritance) and pay close attention to unrest in the domestic sphere. If, as Bruce Boehrer claims, a "deep interconnectedness" (4) exists between the family and the state, it follows that the disruption of the family depicted in these romances reflects the disruption of the state and the probable conflicts within the family caused by the crises in fourteenth-century England. These domestic romances, then, depict this interconnectedness by representing socio-cultural concerns through the disrupted families found in domestic, "popular" romances.

For decades, critics have questioned the meaning and function of medieval depictions of incest and rape. Kathryn Gravdal discusses incest in relation to the proclamations of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the legal anxieties over canonical incest, and anxiety over maintaining women as objects of material exchange; Elizabeth Archibald, on the other hand, provides a comprehensive survey of incest stories, classical
and medieval, to discuss variations of the theme of incest in medieval literature and its influences on literature. She explains that “Just as incest creates convoluted and ambiguous family relationships, incest stories do not necessarily fall into clear-cut literary categories” (1-2). Ultimately, Archibald seeks to examine the popularity of the incest motif and the ways it was used by writers in the Middle Ages; and Evelyn Birge Vitz discusses the supposed sexual fantasies fulfilled through rape scenes. While Vitz argues that rape scenes in medieval literature allowed the members of their audiences “to fantasize about – to toy with, to try on for size – deeds and identities that they would not necessarily choose for themselves” (5), I would argue that medieval audiences would have viewed instances of rape, at least among the aristocracy or highborn women, as threatening and, perhaps, shocking. Moreover, though Vitz is referring to medieval French literature, it is important to note that “popular” Middle English romances of the fourteenth century that employ the rape motif do so to provide a cathartic vehicle for dealing with the traumas that plagued society, and do not necessarily fulfill sexual fantasies through a voyeuristic experience.

This chapter aims to discuss the way rape and incest function as literary motifs within these narratives. These motifs drive the narrative by complicating it, causing the romance to seek resolution. Thus, rape and incest, by creating these critical points of rupture, or chaos, advance the romance and make the textual world consonant with the world of the fourteenth-century reader. Ultimately, these points of rupture drive the narrative to a point of suture, to reestablishing order within the family and the text that culminates in the often incongruous happy endings for which these romances are known.
short period of order, quickly transition to chaos, and then, ultimately, return to a state of order) and their uses of incest and rape motifs as symptomatic of the breakdown of society due to crises in the fourteenth century such as famine, plague, and war. Given the historical context of fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romance, one should, to borrow the words of Evelyn Birge Vitz, “view sexual violence in medieval literature in the larger context of many things that men and women alike understood as happening to them by force and against their will” (2). This chapter will argue, then, that the rupture/resolution form of fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romances stems from the cultural anxiety in which they were produced. Given the historical state of affairs during the composition of these romances, the form of the romances, the textual rupture, signals cultural breakdown. Similarly, the incongruous happy endings allow an audience to experience, or realize, through the imaginative space of romance, stability and order. Indeed, both the validation of fears and anxieties presented through the textual world of romance and the predictability of these texts’ fixed structure must have offered an audience familiar with the structure of romance a certain level of comfort.  

Due to the number of threats rape and incest posed to families in the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that “popular” Middle English romances tend to use rape and incest motifs as points of rupture within the family. Though incest, specifically endogamous marriage, offered landowners a means to keep inheritance, and thus power, within one family, the Church, with few exceptions, outlawed such unions. Endogamous unions, moreover, only served as temporary solutions given that heirs produced in endogamous relationships could not inherit. Thus, once an endogamously married generation died, the family once again risked suffering the same hardships it previously
tried to avoid; in many cases, a family would have benefited more through exogamous marriage, thus joining the power of two houses. What is more, despite the dispensations awarded by the Church and the different systems used to determine degrees of consanguinity, people in the Middle Ages would have considered certain incestuous relationships, such as those between a parent and child, unacceptable; the relationship between a parent and child, the closest degree of kinship, makes incestuous liaisons between them the most extreme and shocking. Like incestuous marriage, rape threatened the survival of a family, hindering the possibility for exogamous marriage by marring a marriageable woman and, thus, taking away a commodity valuable in strategically arranging marriage unions: "Rape of a virgin, a young woman," according to Barbara Baines, "was regarded as the theft of her virginity, the property of her father to be used in procuring an advantageous marriage" (42). Rape, then, thwarted the possibility of a family's survival by diminishing the exchange value of a woman and, thus, the likelihood the woman's family would reap the benefits of a highborn marriage. Given the threats posed by rape and incest (the illegitimacy of heirs produced in endogamous relationships and the way rape diminished the value of a woman as a commodity), it follows that "popular" Middle English romances use both rape and incest motifs as textual threats that rupture the romance narrative. Textual appearances of these motifs would have likely seemed shocking to an audience of the fourteenth century and, thus, appropriate as points of rupture or chaos. Though audiences of romance may not have immediately associated the threats of rape and incest with issues of inheritance, these topics would have created a subconscious discomfort. Moreover, when one considers the myriad possibilities for textual rupture, it cannot be coincidental that writers of Middle English romance use rape
and incest (the two acts that have the most to do with the continuation of family lines and hope for transference of land, power, and order) to reflect cultural anxieties.

The incest motif takes shape in Middle English romance through three primary relationships: mother-son, father-daughter, and sibling and other, more distant relatives.\textsuperscript{32} I have placed sibling incest and incest that occurs between more distant relatives (such as in-laws) in one category because these relationships occur less often textually than mother-son or father-daughter incest in Middle English romance. In romances that portray father-daughter incest, the possessive father attempts to seduce his daughter or hinder her ability to marry. The father's advances either scare his appalled daughter away or he forcefully expels her out of anger over her rejection (known as the "flight from the incestuous father" motif [Archibald, \textit{Incest} 147]).\textsuperscript{33} In addition, there exists unwitting incest, near-miss incest, consummated incest, and unconsummated incest. Each instance of incest varies to some degree from romance to romance and relationship to relationship. Whether consummated or narrowly averted, mother-son incest appears quite often in Middle English romance and is the most common form of incest depicted in brief \textit{exempla} (short tales used in the Middle Age for didactic purposes to illustrate a moral point rather than to entertain necessarily) indicating the level of immorality associated with this union in the Middle Ages; father-daughter incest is, however, the most common form of incest in literature of the later Middle Ages (Archibald \textit{Incest} 190).

Rape occurs less often than incest in Middle English "popular" romance and, due to the breadth of the term in the Middle Ages, references to the act often denote more than sexual violence. Prior to the codes of Justinian in the sixth century -- which
extended, but did not require, the term *raptus* (rape) to include sexual violence against unmarried women, widows, and nuns — Roman law focused exclusively on *raptus* in terms of abduction, not sexual assault; the etymological root of the word, the Latin *raptus*, literally means theft or seizure. Inclusion of sexual violence in the term *raptus*, however, led to problems of interpretation that persisted into the Early Modern Era; indeed, the use of the term *raptus* in medieval texts often leaves the nature of the crime described ambiguous, making it difficult for one to distinguish whether the term refers to sexual violence or denotes abduction. To understand the ambiguity of the term, one need only look to the question of Chaucer’s involvement with Cecily Chaumpaigne and her release of him from the charge of “‘de raptu meo’” (qtd. in Braddy 906) which too leaves the term and the act undefined; one does not know whether Chaucer was accused of abducting or ravishing the girl. Further complicating the term *raptus*, Roman law also employed the term *stuprum*, the term closest to our modern sense of the word rape, which signaled pollution through illicit sexual relations including homosexuality, adultery, and sexual violence, specifically rape (Saunders 35). In romance, as Corrine Saunders notes, rape becomes all the more ambiguous as sexual violence and abduction often overlap and “the issue of enforced marriage [often a form of abduction] is of primary importance [. . .]” (187). Whether one defines rape as sexual violence or abduction, a maiden’s father or a fairy knight typically perpetrates the act in Middle English romance (see “Apollonius of Tyre,” “Sir Orfeo,” “Sir Degaré,” and “Sir Gowther”). It is worthwhile noting that knights and landowners do not perpetrate rape in Middle English Romance: instead, a father who breaks social taboos or supernatural agents such as fairies commit
the crime, thus intensifying the threat by making it unnatural and, by extension, more
difficult to overcome.

In “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” the incest motif functions as a form of rupture within
the family by thwarting the possibility for exogamous marriage and causing surreptitious,
and thus disruptive, marriage instead. Though not explicit, the text reveals the Earl of
Artois’ implicit desire for his daughter, Cristabell, through the series of challenges he
poses for Eglamour (slaying a deer and a boar and battling giants and a dragon) during
his marriage suit. The difficulty and number of the challenges the earl poses for
Eglamour, always deferring the possibility for Eglamour to obtain Cristabell, result in the
surreptitious relationship between the two lovers. Their furtive union disrupts the order
of things within the family and the text by eliminating the proper marriage customs.

According to Georges Duby,

[M]arriage bestowed official recognition and singled out among all
possible unions those that society legitimized as a means of perpetuating
itself without endangering its structural stability. [. . .] It called for
celebration, [. . .] the procession that conveyed a woman, the bride, to a
house, a chamber, a bed, in the expectation that she would soon become a
mother. [. . .] It [marriage] was founded on an agreement, a treaty,
known as the marriage pact (pactum conjugal), that was concluded
between two houses. (4)

The clandestine marriage between Cristabell and Eglamour,34 then, disrupts social order
by eliminating the social function of their marriage (the formal transfer of a woman from
one family to another and the symbolic survival of a house) and opportunity for
exogamous alliances created through the union of two houses. As Georges Duby notes, the public celebration of marriage marked the joining of two houses and the survival of at least one family through the future production of heirs, ideally male heirs (4). For this reason, clandestine relationships such as Eglamour’s and Cristabell’s had the opposite effect, upsetting the social stability the marriage ceremony and celebrations attempted to create.

The earl’s desire for his daughter, coupled with his shame over Cristabell’s marriage to Eglamour and the birth of their child, leads him to cast Cristabell and her son, Degebell, out to sea, thus severing the family and complicating the romance. Moreover, the earl’s abuse of power, casting his daughter and grandson out to sea, signals disorder in the family and the state. The earl’s exposure of his daughter and grandson, motivated significantly by his jealousy over the union between Cristabell and Eglamour, emphasizes his desire for his daughter and exemplifies the corruption of his rule. If one accepts Elizabeth Archibald’s claim that a king’s (or leader’s) “family can be seen as the microcosm of his kingdom” (Incest 145), then the disruption of the family caused by the earl and his abuse of his parental power signals disruption in the state. Here, the text explicitly makes the connection between the family and the state described by Boehrer and Archibald. Indeed, incestuous desires or actions of fathers in Middle English romance often underscore other aspects of their immorality, flaws in their ability to rule, or other political disruption. As Archibald notes, depictions of incestuous fathers emphasize their tyranny: “a man who behaves immorally in one area of his life is assumed to be corrupt in others too [. . .]” (Incest 145). The earl’s incestuous desire, then, functions as a point of rupture within the text that causes chaos by adversely
affecting the order of the state, hindering the exogamous marriage between Cristabell and Eglamour (first through his challenges and then by exposing Cristabell), and thwarting the legitimate succession of their son. The earl’s immoral behavior, behavior that not only ruptures the text but signals disorder in the fictional state, points to disorder in English society during the time of the text’s composition; as Bruce Boehrer explains in his study of Renaissance England, “‘family structure is always already macropolitical; to write or rewrite the family is to write or rewrite the state [. . .]’” (120-121).

The reunion of Cristabell and Degrebell creates additional rupture within the text when, after twenty years of separation, they unite in marriage. Though the text attempts to resolve the disruption caused by the earl’s rash actions through the reunion of mother and son, their incestuous marriage causes additional rupture. When Cristabell realizes she has married her son, “‘A sybbe maryage han we made’” (1139), the text, and medieval law, demand Cristabell marry another knight, one who can defeat Degrebell in battle just as Degrebell defeated his grandfather to win his mother. The word “sybbe,” like the incestuous marriage itself, creates textual tension. “Sybbe” implies propinquity, relation by blood or marriage; the union of Cristabell and Degrebell, joined by both blood and marriage, blurs the line of propinquity. The subsequent battle between Degrebell and Eglamour, however, leads to the reunion of the long-separated family, exogamous marriage, and establishes order once again. If incest disrupts the order of things, it follows that exogamous marriage renews stability of the social order. The reunion of mother, father, and son leads to the dissolution of Degrebell’s and Cristabell’s incestuous marriage, the formal marriage between Cristabell and Eglamour, and Degrebell’s marriage to Organate. These marriages work to restore appropriate, or exogamous,
kindred; Degrebell and Cristabell, once husband and wife and mother and son, are now mother and son only; mother and father are joined together; and Degrebell marries Organate in an exogamous union. In addition to reestablishing exogamous kin relations, the formal marriage between Cristabell and Eglamour establishes order where previously lost through the proper marriage ceremony and formal transfer of the woman to another family. And, while Eglamour does not continue the former Earl of Artois’ line, he does marry Cristabell and establishes order through the *pactum conjugale*, presenting the possibility of establishing and maintaining a system of patrilineage in his own line. The text emphasizes the way, historically, families stood to gain from the hardships of others and, similarly, the importance of highborn marriage if one has “nevyr a child but on./That was a dowghtir [. . .]” (“Sir Eglamour,” Hudson 25-26). That is, the disorder created by the lack of a male heir suggests marriage will, in contrast, result in order.

Moreover, the once clandestine marriage between Eglamour and Cristabell founded on love becomes a marriage of political need through which Artois gains a just ruler in Eglamour and a legitimate successor in Degrebell, the marriage between Eglamour and Cristabell, then, results in political order. Similarly, Degrebell’s marriage to Organate provides the King of Sidon with a male heir. Both marriages evoke a feeling of hope that the newly-wedded couples will produce male heirs to inherit their resources, the same expectation to which Duby refers when he lists some of the reasons for aristocratic marriage. Thus, contrary to Hudson’s assertion that “Eglamour,” by the process of avoidance, “achieves a happy ending without really solving the dilemmas of patrilineage which cause disequilibrium in family and society” (118), the text resolves the patrilineal issues through the abatement of incest and the reinstatement of order. While
the neatly-sutured, happy ending may ostensibly indicate that the narrative does not
explore cultural problems of the fourteenth century, “Sir Eglamour” does, as even Harriet
Hudson notes, present anxieties over marriage and the absence of male heirs while it also
“threatens taboos such as illegitimacy, incest, and patricide [. . .]” (“Eglamour,” Hudson
115). The threat of incest functions as a point of rupture within the text that disrupts the
family which, in turn, reflects cultural rupture. The text, then, resolves itself by
eliminating incest and creating cultural comfort.

Incest functions in a similar yet more explicit way in “Emaré” through Sir Artyus’
desire for his daughter Emaré (1400). Sir Artyus, however, exceeds the over-
possessiveness of the Earl of Artois and goes so far as to propose marriage to his
daughter — “‘Dowghtyr, y woll wedde the,/Thow are so fresh to beholde’” (247-249) —
and seek permission from the pope to proceed with the union. While incestuous desire
and clandestine marriage lead to disruption in “Sir Eglamour,” an incestuous marriage
proposal and a daughter’s rejection disrupt the order of things in “Emaré.” Sir Artyus’
incestuous marriage proposal disrupts the family and serves as the impetus for the rest of
the narrative. Similarly, the anger Emaré arouses in her father through her rejection of
his marriage proposal — “‘Nay syr, God of heven hyt forbade,/That ever do so we
shulde!’” (251-252) — provokes him to cast her out to sea, thus leading to her marriage to
the King of Wales and her subsequent adventures. One must question whether the
romance would have moved in the direction it does without Sir Artyus’ incestuous desire
for his daughter and her utter repulsion.

Incestuous desire disrupts the text again when the King of Wales proposes
marriage to Emaré and his domineering mother interjects: “‘As thou lovest my
blessynge, Make thou nevur thys weddynge, Cryst hyt the forbede” (448-450). The queen has no grounds to dispute her son’s desire to marry Emaré; her only justification for objecting to the marriage stems from Emaré’s elaborate robe – a robe that typically attracts and mesmerizes those she encounters – which the queen sees as an indication Emaré is a fiend. Given the benign depictions on the robe (four famous pairs of lovers), its beautiful jewels, and the general reaction most people have to seeing it, the queen’s view of Emaré as evil is absurd and points to her possessive desire to keep her son for herself rather than share him with another woman.  

Though the text could end with the happy union between Emaré and the king, his domineering mother interferes again in an attempt to separate the two; the queen’s vindictive attempt to break up the marriage and harm Emaré and her son points not only to the incongruity of the queen’s actions but suggests that they must stem from a desire other than for her son’s wellbeing. Textually, this interference functions as a way to advance the narrative. Though the king and Emaré marry despite the queen’s objections, the queen continues in her attempts to keep her son and Emaré apart by intercepting the letters a messenger carries to and from the king. In an attempt to separate her son and daughter-in-law, the queen exchanges the letter a messenger carries telling the king Emaré has given birth to a healthy baby boy with another indicating she has given birth to a devil who “Thre heddes hadde he there;/A lyon, a dragon, and a beere;/A fowl feltered fende” (538-540). Though the queen knows her son and daughter-in-law are happily married, that Emaré has not done anything to deserve rebuke, and that the two now have a healthy male heir, she nonetheless attempts to separate them. Ultimately, when the queen interferes again, exchanging the response from her son that instructs his men ““to
kepe well that lady yyne/Tyll she hadde her hele;/[. . .] [and] To serve her at her
wylle’” (569-572) with a letter instructing the men to cast Emaré out to sea, her
possessive desire for her son moves the narrative and functions as the catalyst for the
king’s wrath, the queen’s death, and Emaré’s subsequent turmoil at sea. The queen’s
interference is necessary to create additional rupture and move the romance to the point
of resolution it achieves. Without the queen’s implicit desire for her son and her
intrusion in his marriage with Emaré, the text could not move Emaré with such ease from
the safety of her husband’s home to Rome where she will, ultimately reunite with her
father; without Emaré’s reunion with her father, the text would fully resolve the conflict
it presents.

Again, the text could end when Emaré and her son drift onto Roman soil and a
merchant rescues them; however, due to the fixed form of romance that demands the
narrative seek complete resolution (resolution not just through the safety of the heroine
but through suture of all aspects of rupture), it, in a strange and somewhat incongruous
way, reunites the heroine with her family in an attempt to achieve actualization. The text
first reunites Emaré and her son, Segramowre, with the King of Wales when he goes to
Rome, now the home of Emaré and her son, to seek penance for his mother’s merciless
actions. The king’s arrival in Rome allows Emaré to regain control of her life as she
orchestrates the reunion with her husband. Her manipulation of the events leading up to
their joyous reunion – “Hetoke he yn his armes two,/For joye they sowened, both
to,/Such love was hem bytwene” (934-936) – along with the cause of their separation (the
queen’s interference in their marriage) make the meeting appropriate and anticipated.
Conversely, Emaré’s reunion with her father, given the circumstances of their separation
(Sir Artyus’ incestuous advances toward Emaré and his forceful expulsion of her), is less appropriate. Through the king proposes marriage to his daughter (a proposition she finds appalling) and casts her out to sea, the text does not hesitate to reunite the two. Indeed, not only does the text reunite the incestuous father with his daughter, it does so in the span of only a few lines:

There was a joyfull metynge
of the emperour and of the Kynge,
And also of Emaré;
And so ther was of Syr Segramour, [. . .]
A grette feste ther was holde,
Of erles and barones bolde,
As testymonyeth thys story. (1021-1029)

Interestingly, the text spends less time resolving the conditions of Emaré’s relationship with her father than it does resolving her relationship with her husband which, if one includes Emaré’s orchestration of the reunion, takes over one hundred lines. The text so adamantly demands resolution within the family that it ignores the incongruity of this ending, seemingly inconsonant with the rest of the narrative. However, while this happy ending may seem indicative of an inexperienced author who resorts simply to form in order to end his text, the form itself as a purpose as it neatly sutures the disruption caused by the incest motif and thus has purpose, creating order in the family and the text.

The rape motif, similar to the incest motif, also works to propel the narrative of Middle English “popular” romance. Contrary to Corrine Saunders’ claim that “rape is found only on the margins of romance [. . .]” (187), I would argue that, though the act of
rape does not always occur in romance (though romance may refer to the rape after the fact it may not describe it), the motif itself has a pivotal function in the narrative. In texts such as “Sir Degaré,” “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” and “Sir Orfeo,” instances of rape occur near the beginning or throughout the text and function as points of explosion that move the narrative forward by complicating the romance to a point that it must seek resolution. Though incest presents itself in “Sir Degaré” through the king’s overpossessiveness of his daughter, the “maiden he loved als his lif” (23), and Degaré’s marriage to his mother, rape serves as the primary impetus for the romance when the fairy knight accosts the nameless princess:

‘Ich am comen here a fairi knyghte; [. . . ]

Forthi afered be thouo nowt;

I ne have iloved the mani a yer,

And now we beth us selve her,

Thou best mi lemmar ar tou go,

Wether the liketh wel or wo.’ (100-108)

The fairy knight’s rape of the princess, though early in the romance, is the point when the narrative explodes and, consequently, functions as the catalyst for the imminent events: the rape results in the princess’ pregnancy, the subsequent birth of the hero for which the romance is named, the princess’s exposure of her son, and the boy’s search to find his true parentage. Though incestuous marriage seemingly functions as the catalyst for Degaré’s search for his father, he vows early on, before the marriage, to seek out his parents: “swor he nolde stinte no stounde/Til he his kinrede hadde ifounde” (309-310). However, though rape disrupts the text, the king’s incestuous desire for his daughter
does, following the rape, signal disruption in the family and the text. Subsequent to her rape and the realization of her pregnancy, the princess tells her maidservant “Men wolde sai bi sti and street/That mi fader the king his wan/And I ne was never aqueint with man!” (167-170); the princess’ allusion to her father’s desire for her, intimated by the accusations she anticipates, “reiterates the theme of sexual disorder and counters the apparent order and harmony of the kingdom [. . .]” (Saunders 215). Uninhibited by social barriers, the fairy knight’s rape of the princess, coupled with the king’s desire for his daughter, signals the breakdown of society and displacement of boundaries. One might extend this breakdown of social barriers to the displacement of boundaries caused by crisis in fourteenth-century England which too resulted in a collapse in social order. 37

Among the obstacles he must overcome in his search for his parents, Degaré encounters a dragon and a giant, both tremendous barriers physically as well as metaphorically, the killing of which signals order. The giant and the dragon, supernatural presences, exist outside the norms of real obstacles. And, although conventional in fairy tales, folk tales, epics, and even romances, the appearances of the dragon and the giant suggest an extra-ordinary kind of disruption, outside the parameters of the kinds of battles a typical romance hero encounters. In his quest to find his parents, Degaré battles an exceedingly threatening dragon who:

Ful of filth and of venim,
With wide throte and teth grete,
And wynges bitere with to bete.
As a lyoun he hadde fet,
And his tail was long and gret. (348-352)
The dragon, “Ful of filth and of venim” like the plague “now vile, black, and hazy./Horrible and fetid, putrefied and infected” (Guillaume de Machaut 314-315), forcefully disrupts life for the earl and his people. Though many fail in the daunting task of battling the dragon, Degaré succeeds in defeating the vicious beast: “And with his bat leide upan./And al tofrusst him ech a bon./That he lai ded, stille as a ston” (382-384). In a similar instance, Degaré, prior to his departure from the castle in the woods, battles the giant that threatens the queen’s land and has killed all of her men. Both battles (the battle with the dragon and the battle with the giant) are unconquerable hurdles that rulers in the text cannot overcome. These obstacles carry heavy figurative weight and signify corrupt and ineffectual leadership as well as disorder in the text. The ineffectual leadership of the earl who cannot defend his people against the dragon and the king who died without seeing to the marriage of his daughter and only heir mirror King of Brittany who, irresponsibly, does not seek a highborn marriage for his daughter but tries to keep her. By overcoming these obstacles, the young Degaré begins to resolve the overall disruption of the social order caused by the violent act of rape and, in so doing, sidelines the ineffectual King of Brittany. What is more, the giant’s uncontrollable appetite for power parallels the uncontrollable urges of the fairy knight at the beginning of the romance. In killing both of the threatening beasts (the giant and the dragon), Degaré begins to resolve the chaos within the text caused by the initial rape and eliminate pestilence.

Ultimately, the text resolves itself through the reunion of the disrupted family, ironically brought about by Degaré, the product of rape and disorder. Where rape functions as a point of rupture, exogamous marriage and reunion, by comparison, serve as means to suture the text:
Then, afterward, now sykyrly,
The knyght weddyd the lady.
Sche and hur sun were partyd atwynn,
For they were to nyghe off kyn.
Now went forth Syr Degaré;
Wyth the kyng and his meyné,
His father and his mother dere.
Unto that castel thei went infere
Wher that wonnyd that lady bright
That he hadd wonne in gret fight,
And weddyd hur with gret solempnité
Byfor all the lordis in that counter.

(1090-1102)

This passage skillfully establishes order where previously disrupted through the termination of the incestuous marriage between mother and son — "Sche and hur sun were partyd atwynn" — and the subsequent exogamous marriages between Degaré’s mother and the fairy knight and Degaré and the maiden he rescues from the giant. Indeed, one must regard the union of Degaré’s parents as an attempt to establish order as one can find little reason otherwise for uniting a woman and her rapist in marriage. In the marriage between Degaré’s parents, the text so adamantly seeks to supplant disorder with order that it does so incongruously, assuaging the knight’s crime; “The rapist,” as Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury note, “seems exonerated [. . .] [and] the consequences of his violent act nullified [. . .]” (93). The marriage between Degaré’s parents not only
exonerates the knight but creates order by legitimizing Degaré, thus establishing his position as a potential heir to a throne that would not have had a male heir otherwise. Likewise, the king’s exclamation at the end of the romance after learning Degaré’s lineage – “I thank, by God.’ seyd the kyng./Now y wot, wythowtt lesyng./Who Syr Degaré his father was!” (1086-1088) – suggests his new found comfort in knowing Degaré’s descent, reiterates the importance of having a legitimate heir, and suggests the king’s additional comfort in knowing his daughter who inevitably marries, marries someone of high birth; that is, someone whose resources and power would be beneficial. Thus, not only does marriage between Degaré’s parents exemplify the advantage surviving males had over landowners with only female heirs during the demographic crisis, but the comfort (perhaps consolation) landowners without male heirs must have found in the high-born marriage of their daughters. Finally, it is worth noting that Degaré’s parents go with him to the princess he ultimately weds, “Wyth the kyng and his meyné./His father and his mother dere./Unto that castel thei went infere,” underscoring their status as a united family. The text’s false resolution, then, though morally and textually problematic, succeeds in resolving societal issues of legitimacy and power.

If the rape motif serves as the catalyst for the romance of “Sir Degaré,” it does so to a much greater extent in “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” serving as a point of rupture three (arguably four) times within the text. One can divide “Le Bone Florence of Rome” into two parts: the first part (approximately 1257 lines or so) a chivalric tale and the second part (the remaining 930 lines) a domestic romance in which rape propels the narrative. The impetus for Mylys’ deception of his brother, Florence, and the people of Rome – beguiling people into believing Emere, his brother, died in battle and lying about
Florence’s fidelity—stems, in part, from his desire to possess Florence and her rejection
of him. Mylys’ desire not only moves him to deceive the people of Rome as well as
Florence and his brother but to attempt to rape Florence. Ultimately, it is this rape
attempt, not simply Mylys’ desire for Florence, that drives the narrative. For the
purposes of this project, this chapter will examine only the second part of the romance,
the section more domestic in nature, though one might easily examine the first section
and Garcy’s (the aged Emperor of Constantinople) insistence on marrying Florence, an
act that results in war, as a form of rape as well. Indeed, “[e]pisodes of abduction or
threats of enforced marriage stand in opposition to those were the lady is won through
honour and prowess of the knight, and military achievements are contrasted with attacks
on her” (Saunders 202). Thus, one should, as Saunders suggests, view forced marriage, a
type of abduction, as a form of rape.

When Mylys, under the pretense of taking Florence to her husband, leads her into
the woods to rape her, the narrative moves out of the private sphere of Florence’s
chamber and allows for her future encounters (Mylys’ desire for Florence would have
impelled the plot earlier in the romance had he not imprisoned her). When Mylys ties
Florence to the chestnut tree by her hair and beats her for the multiple times she refuses
his advances and her ability to subdue his desire through prayer, a lord, Tyrny, discovers
her in passing and rescues her. Following his discovery of her, Tyrny brings Florence
into his home, moving Florence to the next stage of the romance. While the text could
resolve itself with Florence in Tyrny’s care, leaving space for Emere to find her as the
King of Wales eventually finds Emaré, it is at this juncture that the rape motif presents
itself once again, through Machary’s attempted assault on Florence, and advances the
narrative. When Florence rejects Machary and he retaliates by murdering Tyrry’s daughter and framing her for the crime, Tyrry sets Florence out into the woods alone.

Machary’s attempted rape of Florence and Tyrry’s subsequent expulsion of her move Florence into the next phase of her adventures. After Tyrry banishes Florence to the woods, she, a violated outcast, stumbles upon and, out of kindness, rescues the criminal Clarebold from death, despite the previous injustices committed against her. Clarebold, in turn, repays Florence by selling her to a sea captain. Again, the text could end with Florence stranded and in the hands of the unscrupulous sea captain; however, the fixed structure of “popular” romance that demands it end with a pleasant, sutured ending requires additional rupture within the text in order to achieve resolution. Accordingly, the sea captain attempts to rape the less than submissive Florence:

\[
\text{The marynere set hur on hys bedd} \\
\text{Sche had soone aftur a byttur spredd [ . . . ]} \\
\text{In hys armes he can hur folde} \\
\text{Hur rybbes crakyd as þey breke wolde} \\
\text{In struglynge can they stryve. (1840-1851)}
\]

The physicality of this moment in the text, as one imagines the captain forcing Florence onto his bed and hears (almost experiences) the cracking of Florence’s ribs, creates a moment of tension within the text and the audience that explodes as a storm erupts, “Then be ganne þe storme to ryse/And that vpon a dolefull wyse” (1858-1859), a storm the text demands one view as Mary’s salvation, thus causing an eruption in the narrative; just as “þe schypp clave in sondur” (1870), so too does the romance come apart again and move forward.
The storm leaves Florence, presumed dead, on the shore by a nunnery, thus providing an appropriate space for the final scenes of forgiveness and the ultimate resolution of the romance. As with many “popular” Middle English romances, “Le Bone Florence of Rome” finds resolution through reunion. In their attempts to seek out the healing powers of a renowned nun (unwitting the nun is Florence), the various people who offend Florence (Myls, Machary, Clarebold, and the ship’s captain) as well as Tyrry, his wife, and Florence’s husband travel to the nunnery at Beuerfeyre where Florence resides. When she hears of their ailments, Florence suggests Mylys, Machary, Clarebold, and the captain confess their sins (for which Emere ultimately punishes them) in order to find relief. Before Emere punishes the offenders, however, Florence, without thought, cures them all of their ailments, leaving one uneasy with the level of her forgiveness; that is, one expects, based on the severity of the offenses, that Florence leave her offenders to suffer as punishment for their injustices yet she does not. That Florence’s act of healing seems absurd given the severity of the offenses committed against her suggests that curing her offenders functions not as an act of justice but, instead, points to an underlining cultural desire to cure social ailments. Ultimately, however, Emere does punish the reprobates so that the text may achieve resolution, reuniting Florence with her husband, Tyrry, and Tyrry’s wife and ending with a celebration in Rome and Florence conceiving a child, the hope for a new beginning. Though one anticipates the resolution of “Le Bone Florence of Rome” more than in a romance such as “Emaré,” it, nonetheless, superimposes order in the text in a way inconsonant with the rest of the romance: Florence’s forgiveness of the various offenders who attempted to rape and even kill her is absurd. Equally strange is that Florence,
though a nun, leaves the nunnery to reunite with her husband without considering the commitment she made to God, the Church, and her fellow nuns. The incongruous lengths to which the happy ending goes, underscore the structural demands of “popular,” Middle English romance which, by extension, responded to the desires of its audience to achieve a happy, sutured ending, to provide the desired and much needed order and resolution during this perilous period.

In “Sir Orfeo,” too, rape functions as a point of rupture within the text; however, rape here refers to abduction rather than sexual violence. In this short romance of only 605 lines, a fairy king’s abduction of Queen Heurodis, wife of King Orfeo, serves as the only action in the narrative, resulting in disruption in the family, text, and the state. Despite the wall of shields formed by King Orfeo and the several hundred knights he charges to protect his queen, the fairy king succeeds in abducting the woman and making her part of his retinue; “Ac yete amides hem ful right/The quen was oway y-twight [snatched]/With fairi forth y-nome [taken]” (191-193). Grief-stricken Orfeo, having lost his queen, retreats to the woods to wander aimlessly, leaving his kingdom with only a trusty steward as its ruler. As a result of the abduction, or rape, Orfeo and Heurodis are separated, Orfeo loses his senses as the result of his sorrow, and the kingdom loses its ruler. Though the steward takes Orfeo’s place in the interim period between the initial state of order with which the romance opens and the resolution found at the end of the romance, one cannot ignore that a kingdom without a king problematizes the romance.

Again, reunion restores continuity within the text of “Sir Orfeo.” After Orfeo finally convinces the king of the fairies to return Heurodis, the text reunites the long-separated lovers, establishing order on the domestic level. However, the text does not
end with the reunion of Orfeo and Heurodis but continues on to restore order on the political level as well. Accordingly, King Orfeo returns to Tharce to reclaim his throne: “Now King Orfeo newe coround is,/And his quen Dame Heurodis” (593-594). Perhaps the most problematic moment of the entire romance is this anti-climatic ending in which the steward, without any dispute, hands the throne back over to Orfeo after ruling the people of Tharce for ten years whereas one might expect him to treacherously hold the throne as his own based on the king’s long absence. The text, however, ignores the potential for this problem in its attempt to achieve a pleasant resolution.

Conventional motifs such as incest and rape in Middle English “popular” romance, then, serve a specific purpose (to advance the narrative to a point of suture) and are thus intentional literary devices. These motifs create rupture within the text which, in turn, results in textual chaos that the narrative must resolve. Similarly, the form of the romances (described in the simplest terms as order, rupture, disorder, and resolution) leads one through a period of chaos and suffering to a point of order and celebration; the chaos depicted in these texts is consistent with the historical existence of the romances and the real lives of many of the people who likely made up their fourteenth-century audience. Accordingly, the texts seek to resolve the chaos by whatever means necessary, regardless of how incongruous: the texts reestablish what was once lost by supplying heirs, establishing exogamous marriages, replacing corrupt rulers with just leaders, and reuniting families once separated; indeed, reunions of families as in “Sir Degaré,” “Emaré,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” “Chevelere Assigne,” and “Sir Orfeo” are often the points when the text restores continuity. Placed in the historical context of the fourteenth century, Middle English “popular” romances such as
“Sir Degaré,” “Emaré,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” and “Sir Orfeo” reflect the present state of disorder through chaotic explosion within the text. The incest and rape (whether sexual violence or abduction) motifs function not as conventions necessarily but as vehicles through which the texts express broader cultural anxieties and disorder and resolve those anxieties within the text and for the audience, if only vicariously, through the actualization found in the happy endings. The audiences’ acceptance of the romances’ inappropriate, happy endings suggest a certain level of compliance on the part of the audiences and, by extension, a desire for the resolution the romances achieve. The form and style of the domestic romances that employ the rape and incest motifs, then, are symptomatic of cultural breakdown and a desire for resolution and the popularity of the romances relates directly to the audiences’ desire for respite from disorder. Accordingly, fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romance uses incest and rape motifs to serve a crucial function in the greater narrative which, in turn, had a cultural function: to please through resolution.
Conclusion
From Turmoil to Discourse

For decades, critics have regarded “popular” Middle English romances as bawdy, crude, and unsophisticated. These same critics have, moreover, dismissed “popular” romance as formulaic and inferior to their French antecedents and more renowned contemporaries. However, when discussing the “popular” romance genre, specifically the romances written in fourteenth-century England, one must realize that these texts embody different concerns and desires and emerge from a period in time different from that of their antecedents: thus, one should not judge these texts by the same aesthetic criteria. Unlike their twelfth-century, French antecedents, fourteenth-century, “popular,” Middle English romances take the family as their subjects and serve specifically as outlets for socio-cultural anxieties over issues of inheritance, death, class, and marriage caused by the crises concurrent with their composition: the Great Famine, the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, and the consequential rise of the middle class; they almost never debate issues of love or focus on knightly quests. Romances such as “Sir Degaré,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” and “Chevalere Assigne” depict anxiety over the demographic crises that resulted from the catastrophic death caused by the famine and the plague; “Athelston” and “Chevelere Assigne” present characters in socially menial positions who ascend in social status, indicating that true nobility lies not in social rank but in moral character (Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury 343); and “Le Bone Florence of Rome,” “Sir Eglamour of Artois,” “Emaré” and “Sir Degaré” all depict the domestic sphere as threatening and surrounded by anxiety. Similarly, audiences affected by these crises would have found domestic romances particularly meaningful. Concerning themselves with contemporary issues, these romances differ from their French
antecedents and "elite" contemporaries which address issues that concerned their specific audiences (usually aristocratic courts). Romance texts of the fourteenth century, then, served as outlets for the expression and validation of their own highly specific cultural anxieties.

The "popular" Middle English romances of the fourteenth century that may appear simplistic and unsophisticatedly formulaic to critics today reflect cultural anxiety of the audiences in fourteenth-century England. These texts explore anxieties while also providing order and resolution to their audiences during a chaotic period. Given that romances depict textual chaos (anxiety) and aim to seek resolution, it is not surprising that the texts take on a formulaic style nor is it surprising that the writers who convey similar instances of chaos resolve that chaos through similar and, thus, conventional endings. This style, however, is a byproduct of the culture and the cultural needs it reflects and not necessarily an indication of crude writing. That is, though one might view the form of these romances as unsophisticated and tedious, the fixed structure of these narratives, which orders the textual chaos, and the resolution they eventually achieve must have offered a certain feeling of comfort to their audiences in the Middle Ages. The happy endings of these romances are, thus, not simply unthinking, crude means by which writers bring problematic texts to a close, but function as a way to achieve critically important resolutions, however crude to modern audiences.

Similarly, the rupture/resolution structure of "popular" romances such as "Le Bone Florence of Rome," "Sir Eglamour of Artois," "Emaré," "Sir Degaré" and "Sir Orfeo" parallels the unrest of fourteenth-century England and the need for order many people must have felt. Likewise, the happy endings of these romances allow their
audiences to realize, or experience vicariously, the order they desire. What is more, these romances utilize the incest and rape motifs to create moments in the text that result in disorder in the family that the text must, in turn, resolve—fitting motifs given the real threats incest and rape posed to the survival of families (creating illegitimate heirs and corrupting blood lines, or devaluing a woman as a commodity respectively) in the later Middle Ages. The incest and rape motifs rupture the romance narrative by complicating it to a point that it must achieve resolution. It is, however, the cultural anxiety attached to these sexual transgressions and their effects that allows the motifs to function in this way. An understanding of the narrative function of the incest and rape motifs and the formulaic structure of Middle English “popular” romance in relation to the circumstances of its cultural existence expands one’s interpretive view of the domestic romance genre. To view the motifs and the structure of “popular” Middle English romances not as formulaic, unsophisticated, and crude but as intentional and reflective of cultural circumstances intimates the cultural significance, and indeed cultural function, of the romances. These texts rely on the cultural discomfort over rape and incest to create tension in the romances.

If “popular” Middle English romances do, as this project has argued, respond to cultural anxiety, an examination of them may also provide a springboard for understanding both the cultural significance of these seemingly unsophisticated texts and the way literature may have functioned in fourteenth-century English society. To understand these texts beyond their ostensibly crude surface, one must question the circumstances of their existence. Such a discussion offers a new understanding of the texts’ preoccupation with rape and incest, an interesting subject and critical discussion
beyond the scope of this project. In “popular” Middle English romance, rape is not simply a sexual act committed by force and incest does not function strictly as a means to convey a didactic moral (though that may be the case); instead, these motifs serve as a form of psychological displacement of helplessness. In these romances, the rape and incest motifs rupture the texts and, thus, allow the chaos in the narrative to parallel the cultural disorder of fourteenth-century England, making the textual world of romance consonant with the world of the fourteenth-century audience. In these textual instances of rape (abduction or sexual violence) and incest (often followed by the forced expulsion of a daughter) the narrative comes apart and the heroes and heroines cannot control their lives until moments such as Emaré’s orchestration of the reunion with her father and husband. The chaotic effects of sexual violence in fourteenth-century “popular” Middle English romance emerge from a similar chaotic society (bodies piled in the streets due to famine and plague, the absence of priests to deliver the last rites, visible buboes, bleeding through the eyes and ears due to plague, and the slowly perishing bodies due to famine) experienced, seen, and beyond the control of the fourteenth-century English audience, though the chaos depicted in these romances is markedly different from the real disorder experienced by fourteenth-century English society. Stepping back temporarily from literary archetypes and modern aesthetics and examining larger issues such as form and cultural context may, as this project has sought to demonstrate, reveal the cultural and literary significance of the “popular” Middle English romance genre; that this genre has sustained such a long history of scholarship (whether in defense or criticism) underscores the significance these texts throughout time. That these texts enjoyed a popularity in their own times, attested to by the number of extant manuscripts, is yet another indication that
the texts spoke to their contemporary audiences in ways that still mystify or baffle modern critics.
Notes

1 Scholars generally classify romances written by authors other than Chaucer Gower, the *Pearl* poet, and Malory, as “popular.”

2 For more information on extant medieval English romances, see Severs.

3 For a discussion of these issues in Middle English romance, see Harriet Hudson’s work on “Sir Eglamour of Artios,” “Torrent of Portengale,” “Paris and Vienne,” and “The Squire of Low Degree” and Joanne Charbonneau’s discussion of “Sir Eglamour of Artois” and “Torrent of Portyngale.”

4 Though the peasant class was likely more affected by crises of the fourteenth century such as famine and plague, people in all social positions were, nonetheless, affected in one way or another, whether severely through death and suffering, the breakdown of class demarcation (a benefit for some and a loss to others), or the decrease in people to occupy land and pay rent to the aristocracy; as Guillaume de Machaut notes: “There were many estates/Which remained without owners” (424-425), that is estates without people to occupy them.

5 For a detailed timeline of events in fourteenth century England, see the chronology. See also Aberth, “Chronology.”

6 Geographical origins and dates of composition of the romances are according to Severs unless otherwise noted.

7 John Aberth suggests, based on bishops’ registers, clerical mortality figures, and heriots (death taxes) that the common estimate of the number of deaths resulting from the plague (one third or 30% of the European population) is conservative. Instead, Aberth suggests a death toll of 40% to 60% (124-128).
8 For a detailed discussion of the plague and its causes, see Aberth.

9 For a more detailed discussion on the treatments for and preventions of the Black Death, see Aberth 115-116. See also Boccaccio, 1-15.

10 Although Duby refers to the French aristocracy of the twelfth century, his examination of the “lineage-oriented family structure” applies equally well as a precursor to the system implemented in fourteenth-century Europe.

11 The agnatic system of inheritance traces inheritance and relation through male descent on the father’s side.

12 The entail was an estate of inheritance that, by law, passed to a landowner’s designated heirs following his death.

13 My suggestion that landowners benefited from exogamous marriages is counter to David Herlihy’s contention that it was the Church that gained from exogamy and the prohibition of incest which prevented propertied families from monopolizing their patrimonies (11). While the inability of people to marry endogamously may have resulted in an increased likelihood that the Church would receive property from heirless landowners, the prohibition also guaranteed that families would have to marry outside their kin groups, thus ensuring the survival of at least one family.

14 For a more detailed discussion of the Hundred Years War, see Aberth.

15 For a detailed discussion of the term “popular” with regard to Middle English romances, see Putter and Gilbert, “Introduction.”

16 The critical debate surrounding the quality of “popular” romance stems, in part, from a discussion the romances’ probable audiences, of which scholars no little. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert describe the opposing critical views regarding audience as
“romantic” and “revisionist” (3). Romantics, according to Putter and Gilbert, view the romances as “improvised compositions of minstrels [. . .] recited orally at feasts and festivals, intended for the ears of ordinary folk.” In contrast, revisionists suggest the romances “were composed and copied for the amusement and edification of the newly literate classes – not the lower orders [. . .]” (3). Moreover, “Popular romances have been the less interesting to the literary critic because their audience is said to have no significant overlap with that of quality romance” (20).

17 According to Stephen Knight, the number of extant romances varies depending on how many hagiographies and “near-novels” are included (99). Jonathan Burke Severs lists a total of 116 extant romances in addition to those written by Chaucer and Gower and Nicola McDonald notes “more than one hundred” extant romances (1).

18 My claim that one can understand the proliferation of “popular,” domestic romance in the fourteenth century through an examination of the cultural circumstances that surrounded its emergence is counter to Elizabeth Archibald’s assertion that an attempt to explain “literary fashions” by examining social concerns is too “simplistic” (“Gold” 133). Archibald does, however, allow for the possibility that “such concerns can contribute to literary fashions [. . .]” (“Gold” 133).

19 See also Riddy and Payling.

20 The Auchinleck manuscript, the earliest manuscript, according to Laskaya and Salisbury, containing “Sir Degaré” (89), was produced in a London bookshop between 1330 and 1340 (Loomis 601). The approximate date of composition of the text along with Loomis’ geographical placement of the Auchinleck manuscript positions “Sir
Degare" not only during a time shortly after the famine but in the midst of the cattle and sheep epidemics and some of the worst years for wool exportation in England.

For additional information on the benefits of exogamous marriage in the Middle Ages, see the introduction.

For purposes of consistency and to make citations from Middle English texts more accessible, I have emended J to I where appropriate.

Mylys’ actions echo Tereus’ rape of his sister-in-law, Philomela, in the classical story conveyed in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Tereus drags the daughter of the king
to an upland hut, deep in the ancient woods, [. . . ]
he locks her in and openly admits
his shameful passion and his wicked plan,
then overwhelms the virgin all alone. (VI. 746-753)

And in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Tereus takes Philomela into the woods:

And so that tyrant raviner,
When that sche was in his pourer,
And he therto sawh tim and place,
As he that lost hath alle grace, [. . . ]
And in a rage on hire he ran,

Riht as a wolf which takth his preie. (Liber Quintus 5627-5633)

However, whereas Tereus succeeds in raping Philomela, Mylys does not succeed with Florence. Moreover, though Mylys does repeatedly beat Florence, he does not, as Tereus does to Philomela, mercilessly mutilate her body.
Although Boehrer is referring to the Renaissance, his comments are equally as apt when applied to the fourteenth century.

Given the number of surviving Middle English romances, little doubt exists that an audience of the fourteenth century would have been familiar with the traditional form of romance. For a discussion on the number of extant Middle English romances, see the introduction.

Royalty, laity, and Church authorities manipulated incest laws to achieve certain political ends or personal agendas. In the twelfth century, King Louis VII of France married Eleanor of Aquitaine who brought to their marriage the area from River Loire to the Pyrenees, left under her control after her father’s death, thus expanding his control considerably. Due to several marital problems still unclear, Eleanor announced her desire for a divorce. When Eleanor pointed out she and Louis were in fact fourth cousins, the Church granted their divorce. Shortly after her divorce from Louis, Eleanor married Henry Anjou, who soon became Henry II of England, to whom “she was related in comparable degrees [ . . . ]” (Archibald, Incest 42). In both of the instances (Eleanor’s divorce from Louis and her marriage to Henry) the laws against consanguine marriages were manipulated to serve specific purposes and facilitate marriage, expansion of power, and divorce.

In addition to the dispensations awarded to the ruling class, the Church manipulated incest laws for purposes of conversion. Elizabeth Archibald notes that “Pope Gregory authorized Augustine of Canterbury to sanction marriages in the fourth and fifth degrees among newly converted Anglo-Saxons” (Incest 32) to encourage and sustain conversion.
Prior to the thirteenth century, the Church prohibited marriages between people related by blood or affinity (united by marriage or unitas carnis) to the seventh degree. The medieval notion of unitas carnis asserted that once a man and a woman (married or not) had sexual intercourse, they were joined in one flesh. Thus, the man’s relatives become the woman’s and vice versa and any sexual relations between the two would be incestuous. The Church prohibited marriage between people related by spiritual affinity (those related through baptism) to the fourth degree. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, under Pope Innocent III, reduced the number of prohibited degrees from seven to four. Canon 50 of the Fourth Lateran Council lists the difficulty caused by the prohibitions against contracting marriage and the possibility of endangering souls (presumably due to the risk of incest) as reasons for this reduction (Disciplinary 279-280).

For more information on the legitimacy of children produced in incestuous unions and their ability to inherit, see Archibald, Incest, specifically 15-16.

In the Middle Ages, two primary systems were used to determine degrees of consanguinity: the Roman system and the Germanic system. The Roman system counted up the family tree from one collateral relative to a common ancestor and then down again to the person in question; for example, a man would be related to his brother’s daughter in the third degree. The Germanic system, on the other hand, counted the number of parallel generations separating relatives or affines from a common ancestor. Thus, under the Germanic system, a man and his niece would be related in the second generation. The Roman system, then, made one’s relation to a relative more distant whereas the Germanic system made propinquity closer, though certain relations such as parent and
child are more apparent and do not vary from system to system. Moreover, while the
degree of relation of other close relatives such as brother and sister vary with the system
used (related in the second degree under the Roman system and the first generation under
the Germanic), the variation does not change the prohibition against their sexual relations
under incest law of the Middle Ages. Some areas of Europe used the Roman system
while other areas used the Germanic system.

30 This threat applies more to the aristocracy and the gentry than to people of
lower classes as people of lower social ranks would not likely have had the dower to give
their daughters in hibborn marriage.

31 Given the disproportional man to woman ratio during the demographic crisis of
the fourteenth century, it is unlikely that a man would have accepted a marred woman as
his wife when he likely had several marriage offers from which he could choose. For
more information on the number of surviving males and females during the demographic
crisis, see the introduction.

32 I am indebted to Elizabeth Archibald for her informative and thorough
discussions on each of these relationships in Incest and the Medieval Imagination, which
she categorizes in the same way.

33 For examples of the “flight from the incestuous father motif” in Middle English
Romance, see “Sir Degaré,” “Emaré,” and Chaucer’s “The Man of Law’s Tale.”

34 The betrothal of Cristabell and Eglamour, along with the furtive consummation
of their relationship that follows, constituted a valid marriage according to canon law.

35 For additional meanings and textual occurrences of the word “sybbe,” see the
Middle English Dictionary.
This theme of the possessive mother-in-law functions similarly in other "flight from the incestuous father" and Constance romances such as Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale." Although the father of Chaucer's Constance does not desire her, most of the other prominent themes of this motif surface in this story such as the implicit desire of the wicked mother-in-law for her son.

For a discussion of the breakdown of cultural boundaries caused by crisis in fourteenth-century England, see the introduction.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, a rapist typically suffered one of two punishments: he was either killed or had to pay compensation directly to his victim. It was not until the Elizabethan era that rape laws forced the perpetrator to marry his victim as punishment for the assault. See Baines and Saunders.

Given that the medieval view of raptus included both sexual violence and abduction following the laws of Justinian in the sixth century, it is likely that a fourteenth century audience would have viewed the fairy king's abduction of Heurodis as raptus, despite the alternative description of the act (oway y-twight) the text uses. For more information on medieval views on rape and rape legislation, see Saunders, specifically 35.

This point in the text echoes Chrétien's "The Knight with the Lion" (sometimes titled "Yvain"), in which Yvain, grief-stricken over Laudien's rejection of him, temporally loses his mind and retreats to the forest where he lives like an animal. However, unlike Yvain's retreat in Chrétien's text, Orfeo fleeing to the woods does not reflect an inability to find a balance between duty and desire nor does the text attempt to address this issue.
For interpretations of the textual function of rape in romance, see Vitz and Saunders. For interpretations of the textual function of incest in romance, see Archibald, Barnes, Allen, and Gravdal.

44
Works Cited


*Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils*. Trans. and Ed. Rev. H.S. Schroeder, O.P.
St. Louis: 1937.


Laskaya, Anne, and Eve Salisbury. “*Sir Degaré*.” Introduction. *The Middle English


Pearsall, Derek. “Middle English Romance and its Audience.” Historical and Editorial


