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Canacee's Mirror: Gender and Treasons in Medieval Literature

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Joanna Lee Scott Bradfield

December 2011

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Dr. John Ganim, Chairperson

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2011

The Dissertation of Joanna Lee Scott Bradfield is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Canacee's Mirror: Gender and Treasons in Medieval Literature

by

Joanna Lee Scott Bradfield

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2011
Dr. John Ganim, Chairperson

Canacee's Mirror: Gender and Treasons in Medieval Literature examines the multifaceted and constantly shifting definitions and applications of treason law in several key texts of the Middle Ages. Whether in the form of political treason or romantic infidelity, treason presents a serious problem, the very idea of it revealing anxieties about discerning truth, judging speech and appearances, and performing loyalty. These anxieties become most pointed when examined through the lens of gender. Each chapter moves chronologically through the shifts in French and English law, drawing on the work of legal scholars to explore Roman and Germanic antecedents as well as contemporary applications of treason law. The changes in the laws are reflected and refracted in medieval literature by the way individual authors and texts present nuanced and varying depictions of treason, betrayal, guilt, and truth.

These nuances are magnified and complicated when the traitor in question is a woman, and thus the chapters alternate between analysis of both male and female traitors. While the charge of treason for men could be levied for deceptive disloyalty in either realm of the political or the romantic, as Ganelon shows on the one hand, and the men of

The Legend of Good Women show on the other, for many women in the literature of the Middle Ages romantic treason necessarily involves a breach of political or feudal bonds as well. In general, with the notable exception of Lancelot, female characters such as Bérout's Iseut, Chaucer's Criseyde, and Malory's Guinevere demonstrate a much greater awareness of the repercussions of their betrayal, in both reputation and physical punishment, than their male counterparts. Each chapter, thus, examines the complicated nexus of expectations and behaviors with which medieval authors negotiated the definition, presentation, and consequences of treason for both men and women.

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Introduction

In Dante's *Inferno*, the ninth and innermost circle of hell is reserved for the treacherous, those who have betrayed kin (Caina), homeland (Antenora), guests (Ptolomea), and benefactors (Judecca). The very center of hell is occupied by Lucifer, who committed the first betrayal according to Christian theology. The monstrous, giant creature has three heads, and so three mouths, and in one mouth is Judas Iscariot, traitor to Christ; in the other two mouths are Brutus and Cassius, both damned for betraying Julius Caesar. Brutus and Cassius are condemned to be consumed constantly, feet first; Judas, however, is being eaten head first, and only his writhing legs and feet are visible to Dante and Virgil (423).¹ All suffer eternally: Lucifer in remaining frozen in the center of the earth, and Judas, Brutus, and Cassius in being torn open, gnawed at, devoured forever. Treason, Dante makes clear, is the worst of all crimes, the most terrible thing of which humans are capable, worse than lust, greed, heresy, and even murder. Treason is so awful that it is the only sin for which humans who are still living are consigned to hell—in Canto 33, he describes meeting two Italians who have not yet died, but whose souls are already suffering the torments of the ninth circle while devils inhabit their bodies on earth (411).² Once they have reached this level of hell, the absolute center, Virgil begins to guide his pilgrim out of hell, for as he explains, “we have seen all” (423). There is nowhere lower to go, no worse sinners to see.

¹ All references to Dante come from John D. Sinclair's dual-language edition. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume I, Inferno*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford Press, 1939.

² These are Dante's contemporaries Fra Alberigo and Branca d'Oria. Dante himself seems surprised to see them there, asking Alberigo “then are thou dead already?” (411).

As the multiple geographies of Dante's hell indicate, treason can occur in many different ways. My study focuses on treason's unstable location within the nexus of personal and political betrayal, examining several key pieces of literature from the Middle Ages and their depiction of constantly shifting ideas of truth, loyalty, and expected behavior. To this end, I have chosen the title of my project, "Canacee's Mirror," from "The Squire's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer.³ The mirror, a mysterious gift for the beautiful Eastern princess Canacee, magically reflects political traitors on one side and romantic betrayers on the other. Its two sides thus represent the two major areas I explore, while the fact that it is a single mirror highlights the fact that the basic elements of both trespasses are the same. Whether in the form of political treason or romantic infidelity, treason presented a serious problem in the literature of the Middle Ages, the very idea of it revealing anxieties about the fact that appearances, whether of feudal loyalty or romantic fidelity, can be manipulated, and bonds meant to hold social units together can be broken, all in secrecy.

While a full study of the history of treason lies outside the bounds of my study,⁴ any discussion of what treason means for medieval English and French literature must examine its Roman and Germanic antecedents and parallels. In this respect I have relied

³ All references to Chaucer come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987.

⁴ When possible, I have consulted primary sources for the early laws of both France and England, including Phillippe de Beaumanoir's *The Coutumes de Beauvaisis of Phillippe de Beaumanoir*. Trans. and ed. F.R.P. Akehurst. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992; Glanville's *Tractatus de Legibus et Consuetudinibus Regni Anglie Qui Glanvilla Vocatur [The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill]*. Ed. G.D.G. Hall. London: Nelson in association with the Selden Society, 1965; and Henry de Bracton's *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae [On the Laws and Customs of England]*. Ed. George E. Woodbine. Trans. Samuel E. Thorne. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.

on the work of legal scholars and historians such as Floyd Lear, John G. Bellamy, and Richard Firth Green.⁵ Floyd Lear's prolific work on the early history of treason in Roman law and early Germanic law and culture is a crucial starting point for understanding the origins of eventual medieval concepts of treason. Lear points out the king-centered concept of *laesa maiestas* in the Roman law, whereby treason is an offense against the ruler and his realm; it is a crime based on a breach of hierarchical expectations. On the other hand, the early Germanic idea of treason centers on the idea of betrayal at any level, even between social equals. The crime is, thus, horizontal in conception, as opposed to the basically vertical system of Roman treason. As I will show, both of these concepts come into play in the later French and English definitions of treason. John G. Bellamy has mapped out the history of English treason laws from their inception through the Early Modern period, and his volume on treason law provides relevant political and historical context for the development of the legal crime of treason. Bellamy's work focuses on the legal definitions of treason, both those leading up to and stemming from England's statutes of 1352, through which Edward III attempted to stem the proliferation of treason charges by defining the crime more narrowly. The Statute reads as follows:

- (1) to compass or imagine the death of the king, his queen, or eldest son;
- (2) to defile the king's wife or his eldest unmarried daughter or his eldest son's wife;
- (3) to levy war against the king in his realm;
- (4) to be adherent to his enemies, giving them aid and comfort;
- (5) to counterfeit the king's great or privy seal or money;
- (6) to bring false money into the realm;
- (7)

⁵ For Lear, see his *Treason and Related Offenses in Roman and Germanic Law*. The Rice Institute Pamphlet. Vol. XLII. 1955; for Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; for Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

to slay certain officers or justices being in their places doing their offices. (Pollock and Maitland 502, n. 6; citing *25 Edw. III 5.2*)⁶

The definition here focuses, as did earlier Roman and French law, on offenses against the monarch. But the application of this seemingly straightforward list of elements expands with dizzying speed throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Richard Firth Green's work in *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* explores the cultural definitions of what he calls a "keyword" of the fourteenth century (207). Green's work is important in that it explores the nuanced changes in the meaning of "truth" itself in the later Middle Ages, shifts reflected in the constantly evolving constructions of the charge of treason. Green argues that in both popular and official practice, the definition of treason always involved a "breach of mutual agreement" (209). Yet it is the very situational, individualized nature of such agreements which makes treason increasingly difficult to define and control throughout the Middle Ages, necessitating the continual changes in the definition and application of treason charges.

While Bellamy and Green do discuss cases involving female treason, both tend to center their studies on issues of class (how degrees of royalty affect treason charges, for Bellamy) or status (high culture as opposed to low or "popular," for Green). Neither focuses on the role of gender in treason constructions. My study, thus, addresses this gap in the scholarship and expands upon their work to include the gendered implications of betrayal and treason charges. Therefore I explore the literary treatment of the female

⁶ Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland. *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd edition. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

traitor in relation to her male counterpart. Each chapter centers on the depiction of traitors in different periods of the Middle Ages, looking at examples of not just male traitors but female traitors as well. While the charge of treason for men could be levied for deceptive disloyalty in either realm of the political or the romantic, as Ganelon shows on the one hand, and the men of *The Legend of Good Women* show on the other, for many women in the literature of the Middle Ages romantic treason necessarily involves a breach of political or feudal bonds as well. This is nowhere clearer than in the treatment of female traitors. As I argue, with the exception of Lancelot, female characters seem to have a much greater awareness of the repercussions, in both reputation and physical punishment, than their male counterparts.

One aspect of treason law which would seem crucial to an examination of gender and treason is the “petty treason” clause in the 1352 Statute. This differed from high treason in two key ways. For one thing, petty treason involved the murder of a hierarchical superior other than the king: “as for instance when a servant kills his master, a wife her husband, or a layman or priest kills a prelate to whom he owes faith and obedience” (RP 2:239, qtd. in Green 215). For another, it was punished as a simple felony (Bellamy 87). Thus it was treated as a lesser, though clearly related, offense. The clause clearly reveals the gendered imbalance of the law: a man killing his wife was still committing a felony, but could not be tried for treason. Thus the legally inferior position of women placed them in a far more precarious situation than men. A woman committing a crime against her husband was automatically breaching what might be seen as both horizontal (as in Green’s “mutual agreements”) and vertical (in that her husband was legally superior) ties.

However, none of the chapters in my study deal directly with this clause for the simple reason that none of the three female traitors under discussion are ever accused of trying to murder their husbands; while the language of the clause clearly reaffirms the inferior legal and cultural status of women as opposed to men, it is also quite specific in the nature of the crime.⁷ It covers murder, or attempted murder, alone. Yet the underlying idea of the clause, that women's crimes are somehow more heinous than men's, remains a crucial facet of the treason charges that the women under discussion here do face.

Though I move chronologically through the texts in an effort to trace the way literature reflects and problematizes the shifting codes and conceptions of treason and betrayal, I am not interested in making a transhistoric or teleological argument about treason. While the legal and historical evidence shows that there is, of course, a base meaning of treason, betrayal, that always obtains, my primary interest is in highlighting and exploring the culturally and historically specific ideas of treason with which each individual text and author contends. My study's focus on both male and female traitors does necessitate that I cover a broad sweep of both time and genre: Iseut, Criseyde, and Guinevere are perhaps the most iconic women traitors in medieval literature, and Ganelon, Aeneas, and Lancelot some of the most iconic male traitors, but they exist in literature from two different continents, three different centuries, and several different genres. Each chapter, thus, situates the character carefully in his or her particular historical, legal, and cultural context.

⁷ Thus I would disagree with Paul Strohm's use of the petty treason clause to suggest, in *Hochon's Arrow*, that Chaucer's Wife of Bath verges on the treasonous (139-144). Such a reading of the clause seems fairly broad to me. I hope to redirect the discussion of women and treason by focusing on women who do commit (or are accused of committing) what would have been legally recognizable treasons, even if this focus prevents a full exploration of the petty treason clause.

Chapters One and Two focus on two traitors from twelfth-century literature, Ganelon from *La Chanson de Roland* and Iseut from Bérout's *Romance of Tristan*. These early texts are crucial in demonstrating the problematic nature of defining treason within the texts themselves, as both condemn traitors (Ganelon, and Mark's three conspiring barons, respectively) who, arguably, are not committing treason at all. In that these are political breaches, this first section thus deals with the first side of Canacee's mirror. However, the discussion of Iseut demonstrates the acuity of a mirror that has two sides; her trials for suspected adultery reveal that a queen's adultery is treason just as much as a vassal's attempt to damage his lord's army.

In Chapter One, I consider the way *Roland's* Ganelon becomes the ultimate figure of the traitor in medieval literature, a characterization due in part to his inability to appreciate the cultural codes of secrecy and loyalty that operate in his society. While Ganelon admits to plotting against the hero, Roland, he adamantly denies that he does so treasonously, relying on the openness of his behavior, his transparent hatred for and public challenge of Roland. At his trial, for example, he maintains that "I sought his death and his suffering / But I submit no treason was committed here" [*jo quis sa mort e sun destreit; / Mais traïsun nule n'en i otreï*"] (3759-3760).⁸ Yet he is presented from his first appearance in the text to his last as a traitor, an essentialized identity which encapsulates both his moral character and his function within the text. Whether Ganelon is actually guilty of anything has been a scholarly debate for decades, with scholars such

⁸ All text and translations are from *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition. Vol. II*. Gerard J. Brault. Universtiy Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.

as Peter Haidu arguing that Ganelon's defense is valid according to feudal law.⁹ As I demonstrate, drawing on the work of Emmanuel Mickel, among others, this argument is ultimately unconvincing, and Ganelon is justly convicted and executed at the end of the poem.¹⁰ But the persistence of the debate over the categorization of his actions reveals the extent to which treason presents complications. Ganelon is thus a crucial site of exploration for my project, and a perfect place to begin; one of the main concerns in the text is the complexity involved in defining and controlling treason charges, even when the treason appears both legally and morally obvious.

The second chapter centers on Bérout's version of the Tristan and Iseut story, exploring the irony of the fact that while the lovers are clearly betraying Mark (as Iseut's king and husband, and Tristran's lord and uncle), it is the barons who seek to expose them whom the narrator and people condemn most harshly as traitors. This would seem to situate the concept of treason here as reliant upon the privileged relationships between men, a lord and his vassals, linking it to the feudal world in which Ganelon finds himself branded as traitor. However, the main focus of the chapter will be on Iseut's role in the treasonous affair. I argue that it is Iseut who is most attuned to not only the possible consequences of her treachery, primarily in the form of punishment inflicted on her body, but also to the fact that the betrayal itself, as Karma Lochrie argues, is less important than

⁹ *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ *Ganelon, Treason, and the "Chanson de Roland"*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989.

the possibility of its existence.¹¹ Iseut constantly manipulates language and conventions, performing “equivocal oaths” to save herself. She swears about things which are literally true but completely misleading, such as her initial affirmation that she has only slept with the man who took her virginity (whom everyone believes is Mark but is actually Tristan) (22-25).¹² In fact, her clever manipulation of literal truths serves as an interesting, almost inverse, parallel to Ganelon’s inability to use the truth as a sufficient tool for self-preservation.

Iseut is also shown to be aware of a parallel code of punishment for treacherous women, a code with which none of the male characters seem concerned. Indeed, her equivocations seem to be a result of a keen awareness of what her fate would be should the infidelity be discovered: she could be buried alive (35), drawn and quartered (65-6), burned on a pyre (191-2), or decapitated (448). Tellingly, the punishment Iseult comes closest to facing is one she does not imagine herself: being given to lepers to be raped, and thus physically and mentally tormented. This mental punishment recalls one of the more dangerous aspects of treason, crystallized later in the 1352 statutes: disloyalty occurs first in the mind, in thoughts and desires which cannot necessarily be regulated other than through the body. The fact that it is Iseut, the woman, who is subjected to such a punishment speaks to a larger cultural anxiety about control of women’s minds and bodies.

¹¹ See her *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

¹² For Béroul’s text, I am using *Béroul: The Romance of Tristan*. Ed. and trans. Norris J. Lacy. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989.

Finally, my discussion of Iseut explores the way that the idea of treason exposes larger anxieties about truth itself. Iseut seems to know implicitly what others must struggle to learn throughout the story: “actual” truth is a fallacy, and can be just as constructed as outright lies. Early in Beroul’s fragment, she points out that “if the king even suspected it, / I would be drawn and quartered at once” [*“S’or en savoit li rois un mot, / Mon cors seret desmenbré toi”*] (65-66). Suspicion, she knows, is itself damning, perhaps in its way worse than actual knowledge. Thus I discuss Iseut, and her acute understanding of the way that truth and appearances can be constructed, and in fact must be manipulated in order for her to avoid specifically gendered punishments, to explore the gendered ramifications of treason.

Chapters Three and Four move forward to the late fourteenth century, focusing on the way Chaucer depicts the traitors involved in the Trojan War and the stories of antiquity in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*. While the narrative content reaches back toward a mythologized past, the language of the texts borrows heavily from the contemporary discourse of treason. This section explores the marked shift in presenting treason as a crime which breaches political codes to one which violates primarily romantic codes, a flipping of Canacee’s mirror from one side to the other.

Chapter Three focuses on Criseyde as a key site for this shift, as she is perhaps the most famous female betrayer in the Troy stories, ultimately switching both political and romantic allegiances. The developing anxiety over treason and heredity before, during, and after the deposition of Richard II and the ascension of Henry IV provides an illuminating context for Chaucer’s treatment of his heroine. For example, he does not

hide the fact that Criseyde is the known political traitor Calkas's daughter. In fact, he presents this connection as a source of constant shame for Criseyde. The primary relationship here is between Criseyde and Troilus, and we see their mutual love and pledges of fidelity. Criseyde thus makes an interesting comparison to Iseut (and, later, Guinevere) in that she does not actively plan to betray her romantic partner. She uses language carefully, as Iseut does, but in order to remain as truthful as possible, not deceptive.

Chaucer, I argue, works to show that Criseyde remains true for as long as she possibly can. By consistently depicting Criseyde as actively trying to avoid deception and to keep her reputation intact, he foregrounds the problem of intent in definitions of treason. He is writing, of course, after the 1352 Statute has made it clear that thoughts alone can constitute treason. Criseyde does not mean to betray Troy or Troilus, her precarious status as both a widow and a female prisoner of war leaving her with little choice but to decamp both. Despite the fact that ultimately Criseyde decides to remain with the Greeks and Diomedes instead of the Trojans and Troilus, Chaucer is at pains to distance Criseyde from the taint of betrayal, a taint which she, like Iseut, worries about constantly. Drawing on both earlier and later versions of Criseyde, I argue that this nuanced presentation of the famously fickle heroine is a deliberate choice, made all the more striking by the concurrent explosion of treason charges that Richard II's reign saw.

Chapter Four focuses on the male traitors of the stories of antiquity, primarily as seen in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which is itself presented as a response to female outrage over Chaucer's depiction of Criseyde as a romantically faithless woman.

Its exclusive focus on romantic traitors is striking, particularly in the way Chaucer appropriates the discourse of legal treason to his tales of Trojans like Aeneas, and Greeks like Jason and Theseus, betraying not their countries, but their lovers. Written several decades after the 1352 statutes, the legends borrow their language in fascinating ways. Jason, Chaucer's star romantic betrayer ("There othere false noon, thow falsest two!" [1377]), is said to have "compassed" with his friend Hercules how to deceive Hypsipyle, a clear borrowing from the first clause of the 1352 statute (1543). He is also accused of having "courtrefeted peyne and wo" in his deception and betrayal of Hypsipyle (1376).

These specific instances of borrowing the legal language of treason are compounded by the repeated use of the word "traitor" to describe the men, particularly Aeneas and Theseus. Defining treason is a key issue in the poem. As I argue, treason seems to consist of three elements: secret and deliberate disloyalty, an active enjoyment of that deception, and a total lack of concern for the consequences—to their lovers or to their own reputations—of their deception. Aeneas, who presents a complicated example since he leaves Dido in order to fulfill his goddess-given destiny, "feyneth hym so trewe and obeysynge" that Dido cannot help but believe he loves her (1266). Thus the important aspect of the love treason here is active deception—Criseyde may not know, for example, that she will not choose Troilus, but Aeneas here knows he is leaving as he pledges his faithfulness to love Dido. Moreover, he is not worried about the repercussions of his broken oath; none of the male traitors here seem concerned with the lasting consequences of their betrayal, as all of the female characters are. Interestingly, Jason seems to be feminized as he performs, acting "coy as is a mayde" (1548). Even

though, then, the focus of the poem is on males behaving badly, the fact that deception itself is feminized points up the complex relationship between gender and betrayal.

Ultimately, the *Legend* functions not just as a literary treatise on romantic treason, but as a retroactive vindication of sorts for Criseyde. The treacherous men operate under conditions not allowed to women, and their callous disregard only highlights Criseyde's anguished attempt to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter Five focuses on Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*, and the complicated affair between Lancelot and Guinevere that plays a large role in the destruction of Arthur's kingdom. They inhabit a text comprising both feudal and romantic ideals, bringing together many of the issues presented in previous chapters. Ending my study with Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere will allow me to consider these, both sides of Canacee's mirror, together. While the romantic betrayal is at the center of the final books of *Morte Darthur*, the text also has plenty to say about other kinds of treason. Indeed, one of the primary reasons I wish to include a section on such a late text is that treason still functions as the ultimate transgression, and "traitor" functions as the worse possible insult. "Traitor," in fact, is the "grete worde" of the chapter title, used to define those who breach knightly and brotherly etiquette just as often, if not more, than those who transgress romantic bonds (45.13).¹³

Lancelot is a key figure for my study, caught up in both the codes of chivalry which dictate his loyalty and behavior with other men, and his illicit love for Guinevere, which

¹³ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. 3rd ed., 3 vols. Ed Eugene Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. All references and citations are to this edition, with both page and line numbers noted for greatest clarity.

governs his behavior with other women. However, Lancelot also has a particularly intriguing connection with treason in general; he can only ever be defeated “by treson other inchauntement” (253.11-12). In a fascinating way, then, Lancelot and treason help define each other, constructing each other as a sort of ideal—Lancelot the ideal hero, and treason the ideal (that is, worst) crime. The fact that treason is linked here to enchantment reminds us that the key elements involved in the transgression are deception and performance.

However, the most striking aspect of Lancelot’s relationship with treason is the way that the *idea* of treason is most problematic for him. As the chapter on Iseut shows, public perception of treachery often proves more dangerous than the betrayal itself. There are constant rumors about Lancelot and Guinevere in the text, but what finally spurs Lancelot into action is the way his fellow knights (and fellow traitors) Mordred and Aggravayn intensify their use of the actual words “treason” and “traitor” themselves in the last two books of the *Morte*. Lancelot’s supporters warn him that he must do something; otherwise, he will “be shamed for ever, for now ye be called uppon treson, hit ys tyme for you to styrrre” (1215.19-20). What is so compelling here is the way that general whispers about betrayal seem bearable, but the discourse of treason raises the stakes—with his reputation in peril, he must act, and the actions he takes, rescuing Guinevere and slaying his friends inadvertently, hasten the collapse of Camelot. Thus, his concern about his reputation, a concern never mentioned by the men in *The Legend*, but similar to those of Iseut and Criseyde, works to feminize him in a way. As a site for

discussing both realms of treason and gendered positions within them simultaneously, Lancelot is a key figure.

Chapter Five also discusses Guinevere. She is accused of two primary treasons in the text, murder and adultery, and while the bulk of the chapter centers around the second of those charges, an examination of the first raises some interesting questions. Her role in Sir Patryse's death, unknowingly giving him the poisoned apple (a clear parallel to Eve), demonstrates a tension between intent and actions that recalls Criseyde's bind. Although Guinevere insists that she only had "good entente" (592), the matter must still go to trial by battle. This is another way in which anxiety about mental space is expressed through a need to control it via embodiment. What is particularly interesting here is that the woman's mental space must be physicalized by a male body, a champion to fight on her behalf.

Yet this historically correct punishment for treasonous women exists alongside what Robert L. Kelly has termed "Malory's invented treason law" (117). Arthur, it seems, takes charge of treason proceedings involving Guinevere only when his honor as husband is involved directly: he recuses himself from participating in her trial for Petryse's murder, but instigates proceedings against her for her affair with Lancelot, manipulating the laws when it suits his personal needs. The discourse of treason added to the rumors of their affair spurs Arthur into action just as much as it does Lancelot. Thus, while Guinevere is caught in her own nexus of treason codes for women, she also seems to be a pawn in cultural codes of honor for men. Yet she makes a good end in the text, retiring to a convent and acknowledging her role in the destruction of the kingdom. As I

argue, her inability to hide behind physical strength, or to define truth in terms of battle, as Lancelot does, ultimately prevents her from deluding herself, as Lancelot does, as to the nature of her own behavior. She is, thus, a fitting figure on which to end the study of treason and gender.

Chapter One

Ganelon and Treasons in *La Chanson de Roland*

In Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," he makes it very clear that the fox, deadly foe of the hero Chauntecleer, is a vicious villain. The fox hunts the unsuspecting rooster carefully:

Waityng his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,
As gladly doon thise homicides ale
That in await ligen to mordre men.
O false mordrou, lurkyng in thy den!
O newe Scariot, newe Genylon,
False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,
That brightest Troye al outrely to sorwe! (3223-3229)¹

In this mock epic's list of traitors, Ganelon falls squarely between the traitor who betrays Jesus, Judas Iscariot, and the traitor who persuades the Trojans to accept the horse from the Greeks, Sinon. In the Old French epic *La Chanson de Roland*, Ganelon makes a deal with the enemy Saracens, plotting the death of his own stepson, Roland, and the deaths of thousands of Charlemagne's other men. Ganelon is thoroughly condemned both within the text itself and by future literary generations as a terrible traitor. Betraying his kinsmen, countrymen, king, and faith by colluding with the Saracens during a time of war, Ganelon is a traitor par excellence.

Ganelon's infamy throughout the Middle Ages is partly due to the main text in which he appears. *Roland* is often considered the greatest of the French epics; Marc Bloch dates the earliest French epic during "the middle of the eleventh century, perhaps a

¹ From *The Canterbury Tales. The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

little earlier. It is certain that from this time heroic chansons in the vernacular were in circulation in northern France” (92).² *Roland*, composed around the turn of the twelfth century by a poet named Turolodus, celebrates the heroic, though unsuccessful, exploits of the great warrior Roland, beloved nephew of Charlemagne. The centerpiece of the epic is the battle at Ronceveaux, during which Roland and his men are ambushed by the Saracens, fight nobly, and die one by one. As Peter Haidu points out, whatever the historical details of the fight actually were, textually it is a “military disaster” (29).³ R.H. Bloch notes that such epics, *chansons de geste*, are “designed” to celebrate heroism and chivalry,

And yet the *chanson de geste* is, paradoxically, also the genre of war’s decline, a chronicle of its decreasing effectiveness as a tool for the resolution of human conflict. The epic appeared in France at a time of crises within the feudal aristocracy—at the very moment at which its power and prestige were threatened from above by the growing strength of monarchy and from below by the increased role of a bourgeoisie in the economic activity of northern urban centers (51).⁴

Charlemagne, whose role as Holy Roman Emperor made him a forerunner of the monarchy in France, was a key figure in many of these stories.

Much of the scholarship on the poem has focused on the portrayal of the heroes: Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver. The argument between the great friends Roland and Oliver, during which they elaborate the reasons for and against blowing the horn to call for help when the battle seems impossible, has also been the subject for much discussion.

² Marc Bloch. *Feudal Society, Vol. 1, The Growth of Ties of Independence, and 2, Social Classes and Political Organization*. Trans. L.A. Manyon. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1965.

³ For detail on the history of the battle, Roland, and Charlemagne, see Gerard J. Brault’s *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*. Vol. I. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.

⁴ R.H. Bloch. *Medieval French Literature and Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

However, there has been an almost equal focus on the villain of the text, Ganelon. The text itself is stunningly clear on the matter: Ganelon is guilty as charged, a traitorous villain who deserves the horrendous punishment he receives at the end. But this has not stopped a steady stream of scholars from wishing to take a closer look at his guilt. Some of these critics insist that there is plenty of blame to go around in the poem, and that since Ganelon's betrayal is the result of an insult from Roland, Roland is, in a way, at fault. Emanuel J. Mickel notes that in 1936, Ruggero M. Ruggieri suggested that Ganelon's actions were justified by his *desfi*, a legal breaking of ties between men (*Ganelon* 3).⁵ Robert A. Hall, Jr, in a 1945 article, suggested that "The immediate blame falls on Ganelon, for committing what is ethically (if not technically) treason to satisfy his own injured pride, but the underlying mistakes are Roland's" (266).⁶ Similarly, George Fenwick Jones argues that "Ganelon acts logically, given the values and standards of his day. Being surpassed, slighted, and ridiculed by his stepson, he has lost his honor and impugned that of his kindred and has nothing more to lose but his life" (194).⁷ John J. A. Stranges makes a slightly more nuanced argument, admitting that Ganelon is ultimately guilty, but wondering "Is he evil by his own nature or is the evil brought into him by

⁵ See Emanuel J. Mickel, *Ganelon, Treason, and the "Chanson de Roland."* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989. Mickel cites *Il processo di Gane nella Chanson de Roland*. Florence: Sansini, 1936.

⁶ See his "Ganelon and Roland." *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 263-269.

⁷ See *The Ethos of the Song of Roland*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1963.

external forces?” (334).⁸ Critics are keen to point to flaws in the heroes, and mitigating circumstances for the villain, in order to suggest new interpretations of the poem.

As Hall’s comment indicates, scholars have also looked to the legal and cultural definitions of treason in order to cast doubt on the technical validity of the charges against Ganelon. The peculiar chronological circumstances of the poem, which is about an eighth-century society but is composed during the turn of the twelfth century, as France is beginning to shift from feudalism to monarchy, complicates efforts to pin down what codes should be used. As John Halverson points out, “The *Song of Roland* is a Janus-faced poem, at once looking backwards to a basically Germanic tradition and feudal ethos, and forward to the nationalistic development of a coherent French society” (661).⁹ Most notably, Peter Haidu has claimed that Ganelon’s actions to guarantee the death of Roland, despite Roland’s status as Charlemagne’s right hand man and the fact that he gives only a single warning, are a valid response to Roland’s taunts.¹⁰ Haidu argues that Ganelon has acted within the context of an earlier German understanding of law and betrayal but ultimately gets caught up in a system that has moved to a more Roman sense of treason: *laesa maiestas*, or betrayal as a crime against the king or crown. Ganelon, he insists, is an innocent victim of the transition to monarchy in France, and he centers his discussion on Charlemagne as a key figure in this change. For Haidu,

⁸ See his “The Character and the Trial of Ganelon: A New Appraisal.” *Romania* 96 (1975): 333-367.

⁹ “Ganelon’s Trial.” *Speculum* 42.4 (1967): 661-669. Obviously, I disagree with his categorization.

¹⁰ *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

“Ganelon, the feudal noble, has acted entirely within the rights granted him by the feudal code of law in taking his revenge upon his stepson Roland” (161).

Yet others, such as Robert Francis Cook and Emanuel J. Mickel, argue that neither the transfer from a feudal system to a strong monarchy, nor a misplaced understanding of treason, exonerates Ganelon. Cook argues that it is Ganelon who manipulates the feudal system, exacerbating “the weak link that threatens the chain of vows and performance holding society together” (39).¹¹ Mickel focuses more specifically on the question of Ganelon’s guilt. As he points out, it is impossible to pin down a specific understanding of treason for *Roland*: “one must face the possibility that the legal understanding of treason might reflect the law from Charlemagne’s time or that it might reflect the later redactor’s understanding of treason from his own time” (“Implications” 221).¹² But Mickel, highlighting the Germanic origins of the feudal context, claims that instead of providing Ganelon with a justification for his actions, the Germanic origins leave no doubt that his actions are treasonous. He acknowledges that Ganelon’s trial treats treason as *laesa maiestatis*, and that Ganelon’s defense is “purely Germanic in character, given its understanding of treason as the transgression of one’s oath of formal feudal tie to another” (*Ganelon* 12-13). However, Mickel points out that Ganelon is simply wrong, and that even within terms of Germanic culture he would have been considered a traitor: “what Ganelon did was not legal in any period; his open

¹¹ *The Sense of the Song of Roland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

¹² “The Implications of the Trial of Ganelon” in *Approaches to Teaching the Song of Roland*. Eds. William W. Kibler and Leslie Zarker Morgan. New York: MLA, 2006. 220-231.

defiance did not authorize him to set up an ambush against Roland and twenty thousand members of Charlemagne's army" ("Implications" 223).

Much of the critical focus has, thus, been on the men in the poem, on the nuances of masculine and heroic (or villainous) codes of behavior. There are, in fact, few women in the poem at all. As Sharon Kinoshita notes, it is a critical commonplace "that women have little place in this stark celebration of military valor" (79).¹³ But as she has pointed out, both Aude and Bramimonde play an important role in the poem. Kinoshita's study focuses on the notion of (non)alterity in the text, on the ways in which the Saracens and the Christians are generally more similar than they are different, except for religion. It is in the characters of the two women, she claims, that this difference is highlighted most clearly: "Given the crisis of nondifferentiation lurking behind the bold declaration "Paient unt tort e crestiens unt dreit," it is the opposition between the vociferously dissenting queen and the quiet Christian maid that, finally secures the difference between pagans and Franks" (91). Kinoshita's study focuses on the lack of religious distinction in the poem, but her work offers insight into my study of treason, too. My focus in this chapter is, admittedly, on Ganelon, and on the men who debate and decide his guilt and punishment. But as I will argue, examining the roles and characters of the women in the poem reveals even deeper layers of Ganelon's treachery. The radically different reactions of the two women—Aude's self-willed death in rejection of a new husband offered by Charles, and Bramimonde's angry tirade against her own religion and her ultimately open conversion—are options available to Ganelon that he does not take. Thus although the

¹³ See her "Pagans are wrong and Christians are right": Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (2001): 79-111.

bulk of this chapter is concerned with the decidedly male world in which Ganelon operates, this discussion would be incomplete without a consideration of the ways in which Aude and Bramimonde affect our understanding of treason in the text.

As Floyd Seward Lear points out in his indispensable study, “Treason is treason only when it fails, and even then the treason is seldom acknowledged by the loser” (17).¹⁴ This is particularly true in the case of Ganelon, who denies until the end that what he has done was treason. A close reading of the poem, however, shows the multiple ways in which Ganelon is characterized as a traitor: he follows the narrative pattern of the poem’s first traitors, the Saracens; he commits several different forms of treason, breaking oaths he should keep and making oaths he should not; and he is figured as a new Judas, selling his peers for money. As Marc Bloch notes, “The epic was a magnifying glass. But the poet’s inventions could hope to find little response unless they conformed to the common sentiment” (125). The poem is thus key to a study of treason because it replicates the various ideas—legal, religious, symbolic—involved in determining what makes a traitor during the Middle Ages, not just legal, but religious and symbolic as well. Ultimately, it seems clear that Ganelon is guilty of treason, even if his conviction stems from only one of many possible charges. But what a study of Ganelon and the endurance of the debate over his guilt reveal is the fundamental ambiguity surrounding conceptions and definitions of treason. My discussion thus turns to an explanation of the “common sentiment” about treason.

¹⁴ *Treason and Related Offenses in Roman and Germanic Law*. The Rice Institute Pamphlet. Vol. XLII. 1955.

Legal and Cultural Concepts of Treason

Lear states that “one notes constantly that treason is hard to define because the idea is an elusive one” (43). There can only be a debate over whether Ganelon’s actions constitute treason because there were competing and overlapping definitions of treason up through the late Middle Ages. Continental medieval law was prone to be composed of both Roman and Germanic legal ideas and traditions. The Roman conceptions of treason generally focused on offences against the public good or the sovereign, sometimes subsuming the former under broader charges against the latter. While Roman treason law came to center around the concept of *laesa maiestas*, or crimes against majesty itself, it also encompassed crimes involving the betrayal of the state or its armies. The umbrella term is *perduellio*, which included “all culpable dealings with the enemy and all incriminating acts dealing injury to the state” (Lear 8). Within this category, there was *proditio*, or the “Delivering to the enemy of any city, territory or military force belonging to Rome. It may even involve the handing over of the person of a Roman citizen” (Lear 9). It was also a form of *perduellio* to give “aid and comfort” to the enemy, “to make any agreement whatsoever with an enemy, relative to furnishing information, advice, or such materials as iron, weapons, and food. This heading [aid and comfort] covers both vital information and strategic materials in modern parlance” (Lear 9). Thus any unauthorized deals with the enemy, whether in the form of helping them with material gains, such as land, people, or weapons, or even gains in the form of “vital information” were seen as acts of treason in the earliest Roman law, and these ideas remained in the legal lexicon. As the Middle Ages went on, French law, in particular, maintained a Roman tenor.

At the same time, the Germanic versions of treason had a slightly different basis, focused on their system of “bilateral rights,” in which both the ruler and the ruled make similar pledges of loyalty to each other (Lear 33). F. Carl Riedel, in his study of the legal system in the Old French Romances, notes that Germanic treason was “a crime general in concept, private as an act, and social in significance” (20).¹⁵ Here, as Lear explains, “the supreme treason in Germanic thinking is essentially a private breach of faith pledged by man to man. The gravest of treasons is broken troth, *Treubruch, infidelitas*” (34). This could thus occur between any two individuals who had placed their trust in each other, whether they were social equals or one was a lord and the other his vassal. There were still other distinctions in forms of treason, but all forms had this idea of “broken troth” at heart. *Landesverrat*, for example, was an early crime against the land or people, “attempts on the life of the organized group, whether family, community or state, involving the entire nexus of crimes against land and folk” (Lear 43). The German equivalent of high treason, similar to *laesa maiestas*, was *hochverrat*: “When the interest of society becomes personified in an individual or when that individual establishes a special interest, attacks upon him constitute typical high treason” (Lear 57). Pre-feudal France, as Marc Bloch notes, had the concept of *maimbour*, or of certain individuals being placed under the special protection of the king. He explains that “A wrong done to persons thus placed ‘within his word’ was regarded as a [sic] offense against the king himself and was in consequence treated with exceptional severity” (150). Along these lines, Lear notes that “treasons which affect a wider number of individuals as the

¹⁵ See his *Crime and Punishment in the Old French Romances*. New York: AMS Press, Incorporated, 1966.

community or state, or which affect more influential persons as the king, would be more serious than breaches of faith against the narrower circle of the family or a petty lord” (59). As these tribes spread across Europe, their values and legal customs mixed and merged in various combinations with existing Roman law.¹⁶

There was, therefore, a range of definitions of treason throughout the Middle Ages, in addition to culturally recognized systems of vengeance. Mickel summarizes the main differences between the Roman and Germanic ideas of treason: “the centralized nature of the Roman state made treason a crime against the entire body politic,” whereas “In Germanic law, treason was related to the feudal nature of the society and reflected its decentralized nature. At the heart of Germanic society...was the family bond of blood loyalty and the mutual trust between allies or the oath which bound lord and vassal. To betray in the Germanic sense was less discussed as an act against the crown than as a basic failure to fulfill the oath or fealty owed to friend or kin” (“Defense” 165). This complexity is compounded by other competing forms of available justice, particularly legal vengeance. As R.H. Bloch notes, private vengeance was “A persistent fact of life in the Middle Ages” (64). The *wergild* system of the early Germanic tribes, in which harms done against men or women could be resolved through payment, was one way of combating this tendency. But Marc Bloch points out that authorities continually “strove to draw a distinction between lawful reprisals and plain brigandage carried out under the pretext of justifiable vengeance” (128).

¹⁶ For more on the treason laws of individual tribes, see Lear’s *Treason in Roman and Germanic Law: Collected Papers*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965.

Feudal law kept many of the same principles which had applied earlier only to kin groups. As Haidu points out, “Fidelity works both ways” (88). Vassals were bound to serve their lords, but lords were just as equally bound to watch over their vassals. Marc Bloch notes that vassalage was “a bond of such a nature that to disregard it was the most terrible of sins,” and “felt to be so strong that the idea of it dominated all other human ties—even those which were older and which might have appeared more worthy of respect” (232).¹⁷ These were cemented by rituals of homage and fealty, particularly during the reign of Charlemagne. As Kelly Devries points out, “All soldiers were required to take an oath of fealty to Charlemagne. This was the first time since the fall of Rome that such an oath had been required” (87).¹⁸ In order to break off these overarching ties, men had to make an open and public declaration of the change in allegiance, known as a *desfi*. Marc Bloch describes *desfi* as an inverse of the process of homage:

Declaring his intention to cast away from him (*rejeter*) the ‘felon’ partner, with a violent gesture he hurled to the ground a twig—sometimes breaking it beforehand—or a thread from his cloak. But, in order that the ceremony should seem as decisive as the one whose effects it was to destroy, it was necessary that it should follow the pattern of homage by bringing the two individuals face to face. This proceeding was not without its dangers. Consequently, in preference to the gesture of throwing down the ‘straw’ (which before reaching the stage at which a usage becomes a rule fell into disuse) the practice developed of making a simple ‘defiance’ (*défi*)—in the etymological sense of the word, that is to say a renunciation of faith—by

¹⁷ Haidu does point out the darker side of this arrangement: “Feudal vassals were the agents of seigneurial oppression who, by the fear they inspired, constrained the peasantry to bend to the yoke, to fulfill the requirements of new forms of labor, of the productive labor assigned to it by existing power” (52).

¹⁸ See “Military History and Technology in the Song of Roland.” In *Approaches to Teaching the Song of Roland*. Eds. William W. Kibler and Leslie Zarker Morgan. New York: Modern Language Association, 2006. 77-89.

letters or by herald. The less scrupulous, who were not the least numerous, naturally began hostilities without any preliminary declaration. (228)

The *desfi*, thus, starts out as a ceremony just as ritualized as that of homage, with “the two individuals face to face.” It is deadly serious, which, as Bloch points out, explains why it became more expedient—and safer—simply to declare the “renunciation of faith” without actually being present.¹⁹ Each aspect of feudal relationships was formally signaled, underscoring their importance.

Thus although there were different legal and social customs throughout the Middle Ages, many of ideas of treason had clear parallels. Moreover, as time went on, several areas began to merge both Roman and Germanic concepts of loyalty and betrayal. This melding of ideas can still be seen in the thirteenth-century customary of Beaumanoir, who offers some variations on the above ideas. In his *Coutumes*, he states that of many crimes, “one of the greatest and which the lord should punish the most severely, is conspiracy [*alliances*] against the lord or the common good” (§883; 314).²⁰ He also notes early in his text that if you are summoned to help your lord against an enemy, you must not delay (§65, p. 35). Yet at the same time, F.R.P. Akehurst, in his edition of Beaumanoir, notes that “Treachery or *traison* does not imply some crime against the state but rather that the act was committed without forewarning (such as when two men are in private war) and perhaps even in an ambush” (649, n.2). Stealth, or secrecy, was the key component of felonies, including treason, throughout the Middle

¹⁹ This is also known as *diffidatio*, a process “whereby a vassal could withdraw his pledge and allegiance from a faithless lord” (Lear 35).

²⁰ *The Coutumes de Beauvaisis of Phillipe de Beaumanoir*. Trans. and ed. F.R.P. Akehurst. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992. All quotations and translations are from this edition.

Ages. It was what separated homicide from murder, much in the way premeditation serves to separate the two in modern law. Mickel agrees: “It is very clear in the Germanic and later provincial codes that treason involved stealth. In fact, it is stealth which really was the crucial element in treason” (“Defense” 166).²¹ It is impossible to betray without an element of surprise.

Even with the distinction between crimes against the state and those against other men that Akehurst elucidates, it is easy to see how treasons can be compounded: if any ambush may be treason already, then an ambush which is also “against the lord or the common good” is especially heinous. While the *desfi* signals a clear break, and the end of mutual trust, loyalty, and duty, that is all it does. Beaumanoir argues that direct threats of private war must be explicit. He states that “If someone wants to make war on another through his words, he must not make them ambiguous or secret, but so clear and so evident that the person to whom the words are spoken or sent knows that he must be on his guard, and if a person acted otherwise it would be treachery [*traisons*]” (§1675, p. 613). Medieval laws against and conceptions of treason were constantly shifting, and sometimes revealed the particular emphasis of a specific culture: the privileging of the sovereign and the state in Roman laws, and the privileging of mutual oaths and duties in Germanic laws. But these also clearly overlapped, and certain actions—helping the enemy, hurting the common good, and betraying one to whom you owed allegiance—were always considered treasonous. Despite his denial, Ganelon is guilty of all three.

²¹ This view is confirmed by F. Carl Riedel, who notes that it is “this element of surprise and secrecy which furnishes the true meaning of the word *treason*” (22).

Treason in *Roland*

Marsile

The poem offers an insight into its own conceptions of treason by starting off with a scene at the camp of the treacherous Saracens. There is immediate deception and betrayal, but not from Ganelon. At the Saracen camp in Saragossa, a frustrated King Marsile is trying to figure out what to do since he can no longer fight Charlemagne (18-19). Blancandrin, one of Marsile's "cunning vassals" ["*saive hume*"] (20), suggests that Marsile simply lie: he will pretend to submit to Charlemagne (28-29), swear to convert to Christianity (38), and send hostages as pledges of his truth (40).²² Blancandrin is willing to send his own son, "even though it means certain death for him" ["*Par num d'ocire i enveierai le men*"] (43). After Charlemagne has recalled his forces and returned to France, leaving the Saracens encamped in Spain, they can simply refuse to follow through on their promises: Charlemagne "will not hear a word from us" ["*N'orrat de nos paroles ne nuvels*"] (55). As Eugene Vance notes, the poem thus suggests that "pagan society is founded on treason" (4).²³ Promises mean nothing; they are going to make an oath and then break it, relying on deception to avoid an unpleasant fate. Kinoshita points out that "the primary categories of difference are *Saracen* and *pagan*" (82), but that "Identical to the Franks in language and custom, the pagans arguably differ from the Franks in religion *and nothing more*" (83; italics in original). However, at this point in the poem, the Saracen reliance on deception is another way in which the two groups

²² All text and translations are from *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition. Vol. II*. Gerard J. Brault. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.

²³ See his *Reading the Song of Roland*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970.

differ.²⁴ From the start of the poem, then, we see that treachery appears to be the only option for the defeated who refuse to surrender in actuality. The poem lays out both deceptive submission to an unpleasant situation in war, and willingness to sacrifice one's own men—even family—as part of the deception as key signs of not only villainy, but treachery. Honor, one of the most precious commodities in the feudal age, serves as the tool by which treason can be enacted if one does not care about losing it. With a foe who is willing to sacrifice this, Charlemagne “cannot help being deceived by them in some way” [*“Nes poet garder que alques ne l’engignent”*] (95). Even before Ganelon enters the poem, treason is depicted as cowardly deception, a refusal either to fight or acknowledge defeat honestly.

The First Nomination: Ganelon’s *desfi*

This initial treachery, cemented after Blancandrin actually delivers the false proposition to Charles, sets the stage for Ganelon’s treason to follow. The debate over Ganelon’s guilt or innocence hinges upon his angry words once he has been nominated to go to the Saracen camp to report that Charles has accepted Blancandrin’s proposal. Initially, the French themselves wonder whether they should even send an ambassador. Charlemagne and his men are well aware that Marsile is capable of great treachery. He has deceived them before, and they recall the details as they debate accepting Blancandrin’s current offer. Roland is vehemently against trusting a known liar: “Believe Marsile and you shall rue the day!” [*“Ja mar crerez Marsilie!”*] (196). He reminds everyone that “King Marsile behaved most treacherously” [*“Li reis Marsilie i fist mult*

²⁴ Ganelon, of course, will complicate this neat division.

que traître”] (201), offering similar terms of concession (204), and then murdering Charlemagne’s messengers, Basan and Basile (208-209). There is no reason, he suggests, to believe him this time. Ironically, it is Ganelon who proposes that they take Marsile at his word since the benefits would be great (220-229). When he is seconded by Naimés, although for different reasons, the Franks decide they must send someone to confirm the deal.²⁵ The selection of someone both brave and trusted enough to carry out this new mission is a difficult process. Several of Charlemagne’s most trusted men offer themselves for the position: Naimés, Roland, Oliver, and Bishop Turpin (246-270). But each is rejected in turn by Charlemagne, who refuses to subject any of the Twelve Peers or his most trusted advisors to the danger.²⁶ He insists that the barons themselves nominate someone else.²⁷ Accordingly, Roland nominates Ganelon (277). The barons all agree that he would do the job well: “He’d be good at it! / If you pass him up, you won’t find a worthier individual to send” [*“Car il le poet ben faire! / Se lui lessez, n’i trametrez plus saive”*] (278-9). The matter seems settled.

It is not that simple, however, and Ganelon’s reaction to this nomination is the crux of the debate, both in the text and in the scholarship, over his guilt or innocence.

²⁵ Edward C. Schweitzer, Jr. notes that “Naimés accepts Ganelon’s conclusion but rejects the argument which led to it” (429). Naimés, he points out, is more interested in “mercy and sin, not profit and loss” (432). See his “*Mais qu’il seit entendud*”: Ganelon’s and Naimon’s Speeches at the Council of the French in the *Chanson de Roland*.” *Romance Notes* 12 (1971): 428-434.

²⁶ He tells Naimés that he is “a valuable man” [*“saives home”*] (248); he tells Roland and Oliver that neither they nor any of the Twelve Peers will be sent, “or else” [*“per mar”*] (262); finally, he tells Turpin, “Don’t say another word unless I order you to!” [*“N’en parlez mais, se jo nel vos cumant”*] (273).

²⁷ Haidu suggests that this is just the first instance of Charlemagne mishandling his barons. He argues that much of the focus on Ganelon’s guilt is a result of the text’s anxiety that the calamity of Ronceveaux is somehow Charles’s fault: the text is concerned with parrying potential accusations asserting Charles’s culpability” (90). This does seem to be the only time in which Charles overrules his barons.

This nomination can be seen in different ways: as a compliment to a brave, strong, and trustworthy fellow baron, or as an insult to someone who is disposable. Although the rest of the French seem to think that Ganelon is a great choice, and worthy of such a difficult and dangerous task, he takes the nomination as an affront. As many critics point out, the downgrading of suggestions for the nomination is almost comical; clearly, Charlemagne will not let his most prized men, the Twelve Peers, go, and so anyone who is nominated after that is obviously less valuable. Peter Haidu, for one, argues that “to nominate Ganelon under these conditions is therefore to designate him as a ‘second-class citizen’” (71). Ganelon’s “fierce” physical reaction (283) is telling, reflecting his emotional reaction; whether he is insulted at the implication of lowered status or simply frightened of the mission, he is clearly upset. Ganelon “tears his great marten furs away from his throat” [*“De sun col getet ses grandes pels de martre”*] (281).²⁸ Having understood Roland’s nomination as an act of wrath [*“esrages”*] (286), Ganelon suggests that his status as Roland’s stepfather should have somehow spared him the nomination: “Everyone knows very well that I am your stepfather, / Yet you have named me to go to Marsile!” [*“Ço set hom ben que jo sui tis parastres, / Si as juget qu’a Marsiliun en alge!”*] (287-88).

It is this, to Ganelon, incredible behavior²⁹ that prompts him to break with Roland. Roger Pensom explains that he “construes the nomination as a private threat,

²⁸ Haidu reads these lines as a sign of Ganelon’s courage, readying himself to draw his sword (67). Stranges agrees, arguing that “now the poet describes him as a proud and handsome knight, worthy of admiration” (339).

²⁹ Cook notes the “inconsistency” in this reaction since “this nomination is for an embassy he himself championed energetically” (24).

rather than a public inevitability and behaves accordingly” (92).³⁰ Ganelon immediately declares that “If God wills that I should return from there, / I’ll take such great vengeance on you / That it will last you all your life” [*“Se Deus ço dunet que jo de la repaire, / Jo t’en mubra un si grant contrair / Ki durerat a trestut tun edage”*] (289-291). The “If God wills” suggests that he is well aware that he might not survive the journey; he is scared, and that fear is manifesting as anger.³¹ As Haidu points out, “Vengeance itself is part of the exchange system: it consists of an exchange of damages for damages” (58). Ganelon clearly considers himself to be a wronged party here. However, what he threatens in return is quite complicated. More importantly, he implies that the vengeance will come *after* he has returned. It does not imply that he will begin the process *during* the mission itself. Finally, he swears that the vengeance will be lasting, but he does not specify that it will be death. Roland acknowledges Ganelon’s words as a threat, but dismisses them: “Everyone knows very well that threats don’t intimidate me” [*“Ço set hom ben, n’ai cure de manace”*] (293). Roland has not understood just how serious Ganelon is, and the terms of his threat are so vague that they are almost meaningless.

Although Ganelon becomes more and more exasperated with Roland, he seems unwilling to declare an actual break with Charles. The overlapping feudal ties and duties present him with some problems. Roland’s offer to go in Ganelon’s place even though Charles has already forbidden it further enrages Ganelon (295), who points out that

³⁰ See *Literary Techniques in the Chanson de Roland*. Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1982.

³¹ That he is scared also seems clear in the way he puts his affairs in order before he leaves, reminding Charlemagne that he wants his son Baldwin to be his heir (315) since “I’ll not set eyes on him again” [*“ja nel verrai des oilz”*] (316).

Roland is in no position to make such an offer: “You’re not my vassal and I’m not your lord” [*“Tu n’ies mes hom ne jo ne sui tis sire”*] (297). As Mickel points out, Ganelon at least has this feudal principle correct (*Ganelon* 58-9). Ganelon promises once more to “do something a bit ill-advised / Before I purge this great anger of mine” [*“Einz i frai un poi de legerie, / Que jo n’esclair caste meie grant ire”*] (300-301). Roland’s response infuriates Ganelon: he laughs (302).³² This is the last straw for Ganelon, who angrily “very nearly goes out of his mind” [*“A ben petit que il ne pert le sens”*] (305). He tells Roland simply that “I don’t care what happens to you now. / You arranged to have this rotten nomination fall on me” [*“Jo ne vus aim nient. / Sur mei avez turnet fals jugement”*] (306-307). As mentioned earlier, plenty of critics have seen Roland’s behavior here as a definite provocation. Marianne Ailes, for example, claims that “The mocking of a potentially dangerous man is the trigger from which the whole tragic tale unfolds” (34).³³ Yet none of the Franks seem to realize where this is heading.

Ganelon does not stop at breaking his ties with Roland. As Cook argues, Ganelon’s “is a complex and multilayered betrayal, and it develops slowly both here, in its virtual or potential form (i.e. in words of engagement) and later... in fact” (30). Complicating the picture, Ganelon blames Roland one last time but then expands his anger to include the Twelve Peers:

Roland is responsible for all this!
 For the rest of my life I shall not care what happens to him,
 Nor to Oliver, because he is his companion,
 Nor to the Twelve Peers, because they love him so.

³² Stranges argues that Roland’s behavior is petty here, and that without the narrator’s previous qualification of Ganelon as a traitor, the audience would be expected to sympathize with Ganelon (340).

³³ See her *The Song of Roland—On Absolutes and Relative Values*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

I hereby defy them, sire, in your presence.

[*ço ad tut fait Rollant!*
Ne l'amerai a trestut mun vivant
Ne Oliver, por ço qu'il est si cumpainz,
Li duze per, por qu'il l'aiment tant.
Desfi les ci, sire, vostre veiant.] (322-326)

Ganelon has thus verbally and publicly declared his hatred for Roland several times, and his defiance of the Twelve Peers once. As Cook points out, “Ganelon is renouncing his place in his own social group, now using the even clearer verb *desfier*, signifying his rejection of the feudal bond” (24-5). He has not thrown down a straw, but he has torn off his cloak, stated that he does not care about Roland, and formally defied Roland, Oliver, and all the Peers. Moreover, he does this specifically in the presence of his lord, Charles.

The one person, therefore, with whom Ganelon does not make a clear break is Charles, and this will prove to be his downfall. His vacillation between spewing ominous but vague warnings to Charles’s other vassals and still accepting the mission indicates that he thinks he can separate the two. Ganelon seems to have no problem conceding to Charles, his lord. Even as he spars with Roland, he confirms his loyalty and duty to Charlemagne. He knows that he himself is Charles’s vassal, and as such, he will do as he is told: “Charles orders me to render him a service, / So I’ll go to Saragossa, to Marsile” [*Carles commander que face sun servise, / En Sarraguce en irai a Marsilie*] (288-289). Immediately after telling Roland that he does not care what happens to him, he reaffirms his duty to Charles: “Rightful Emperor, I stand here before you, / I wish to carry out your orders” [*Dreiz emperere, veiz me ci en present, / Ademplir voeill vostre comandement*] (308-309). But therein lies his problem. It seems clear that any vengeance he might take

on them during his mission, while he is supposed to be under Charles's "orders," is tainted, unlawful. He cannot do both since Charles's orders would preclude such vengeance.

Even though Ganelon seems to maintain his loyalty to his lord, it is difficult to read his dropping of the ceremonial gauntlet, a symbol of Charles's trust in Ganelon and his mission, as anything other than a symbolic break with Charles. The narrator, for one, suggests that this is deliberate on Ganelon's part:

The Emperor extends his right gauntlet to him,
But Count Ganelon had no desire to be there,
When he was about to take the glove, it fell to the ground.
The French say: 'God! What does this mean?
We will suffer a great loss because of this message.'
'My lords,' said Ganelon, 'you shall hear more about this!'

*[Li empereres li tent sun guant, le destre,
Mais li quens Guenes iloec ne volsist ester,
Quant le dut prendre, si li calt a tere.
Dient Franceis: 'Deus! Que purrat ço ester?
De cest message nos avendrat grant perte.'
'Seignurs, 'dist Guenes, 'vos en orrez noveles!']* (331-336)

Thus Ganelon seems to have made his anger with everyone, including Charlemagne, clear. He has cut himself off from Roland specifically four times, and from Oliver and the Twelve Peers once, all in direct speech. He even seems to break with Charlemagne himself although, crucially, he does not verbalize it. All he says is that they will "hear more about this." But of course, they do not. Ganelon never offers another warning to anyone, much less Charles. Dropping the gauntlet is not, of course, in any way a clear *desfi*, simply a bad omen. But it is a fitting representation of Ganelon's confused relationship with his emperor.

One key point that is often overlooked is the fact that everyone in the poem seems to take the dropping of the gauntlet far more seriously than they take the actual *desfi*. There is no worried murmuring after Ganelon has made his threats to Roland or his break with the Twelve Peers. The symbolic dropping of ties seems far more perilous to the Franks. Yet even after the ominous performance with the gauntlet, Charles still “gave him absolution and blessed him” [*l’ad asols e seignet*] (340). Although there is grumbling in Ganelon’s tent, with his people swearing that Roland “Will not be protected or saved by Charlemagne” [*Par Charlemagne n’ert guariz ne tensesz*] (354), none of the Twelve Peers, nor the rest of the French, indicate any fear or even awareness that Ganelon’s vengeance could already be at hand. It is unclear, then, just how effective his *desfi* has been. The fact that Ganelon accepts the blessing and embarks on the mission is, in its own way, a deception. However, it is impossible to tell whether Ganelon himself is aware of this; his acceptance of the embassy is perhaps the strongest indication that he still considers himself loyal to his lord even as he threatens his lord’s most cherished vassals, the Twelve Peers.³⁴

Ganelon

A look at what Ganelon does while he is on his mission makes it clear that he exceeds the bounds of his *desfi* and commits treason on several levels. Ironically, as Joseph J. Duggan points out, “the embassy will eventually lead to his own destruction,

³⁴ In another of the poem’s ironies, Ganelon refuses to let any of his men accompany him, saying that it is “Far better that I should die alone than so many good knights” [*Mielz est que sul moerge que tant bon chevalier*] (359). This is not the logic he will employ when he sets up the death of not just Roland and the Twelve Peers, but also the other twenty-thousand men with them.

although not in the manner he foresees” (176).³⁵ Ganelon’s betrayal occurs in three distinct steps: his crafting of the plan with the Saracens, his nomination of Roland to stay in the rearguard so that there can be an attack, and his attempt to dissuade Charlemagne from going to Roland’s aid too quickly. The first step itself is repeated as he discusses it hypothetically with Blancandrin, makes a deal with him, and then must confirm the details with Marsile, too. All of this is followed by a lengthy description of the gifts given to Ganelon to seal the deal. Thus the poem repeats the betrayal, with variations, making the treason clear on both literal and symbolic levels.

The two messengers are a perfect match of treachery: Blancandrin’s goal is to gain the ambassador’s trust so that he can set up the Saracen betrayal of the truce, and Ganelon’s aim is to use the Saracens to enact his revenge on Roland.³⁶ Blancandrin and Ganelon engage in a conversation loaded with implication: Blancandrin presses Ganelon for information about the strength of Charlemagne and his army while Ganelon repeatedly discusses the ways in which Roland is the key to Charlemagne’s fighting forces. Ganelon broaches the idea hypothetically at first: he tells Blancandrin that Roland is mad (389) and that “If someone were to kill him, then we would have real peace” [*“Seit ki l’ociet, tute pais puis avriumes”*] (391).³⁷ When Blancandrin seems willing to play along, agreeing that “Roland is a maniac / To want to subdue all peoples / And assert

³⁵ See his *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

³⁶ Any thought that Ganelon is tainted by his contact with the Saracens, and that this is where his treason has roots, is mistaken. Ganelon clearly has the plan in mind before he gets there.

³⁷ George Fenwick Jones has argued that Ganelon is ultimately a “peacemaker” (102). However possible it is that Ganelon’s initial vote to believe the Saracen ambassador does stem from some desire to stop the war, though, it is clear here that he is not interested in peace so much as revenge.

a claim to all lands!” [*“Multe est pesmes Rollant, / Ki tute gent voelt faire recreant / Et tutes teres met en chalagement!”*] (392-4), Ganelon stresses that the French “love him so much they will never fail him” [*“Il l’aiment tant ne li faldrunt nient”*] (397). He may as well be drawing a target on Roland’s back. Moreover, he says, Roland “holds sway over the Emperor himself. / He will conquer for him all the lands from here to the Orient” [*“L’emperere meïsmes ad tut a sun talent. / Cunqueerrat li les teres d’ici qu’en Orient”*] (400-401). Under the guise of boasting, Ganelon is giving Blancandrin all the information he needs in order to see that taking Roland out of the equation would be the best move for the Saracens. This cannot be what Charlemagne has envisioned for his mission. Even here, Ganelon is flirting with treason: according to Roman law, he is helping the enemy by giving important information, while according to Germanic law, he is hijacking the mission that he gave his word to perform honestly. Either way, since this information is a weapon against the lord to whom he has sworn his loyalty, his actions here are treacherous.

Ganelon’s success, extolling Roland’s virtues as a warrior so that he will be a clear target for the Saracens, is also his downfall, moving him inextricably into treasonous territory. By the next stanza of the poem, Blancandrin and Ganelon have come to an agreement: Roland must die. Vexingly, the details of the agreement are not revealed at this point. All the poet tells us is that “Eventually they gave each other their word / That they would find a way to have Roland killed” [*“Que l’un a l’autre la sue fait plevit / Qui l’querreient que Rollant fust ocis”*] (403-404). Ganelon has arranged with an enemy to have his own kinsman and countryman killed, which is bad enough. But even more

importantly, this arrangement is coming in the context of the previous conversations, in which Roland is explained to be a crucial piece of Charlemagne's army. Ganelon seems blissfully unconcerned with any damage his plan will do to his lord, to whom he is still loyal. He is lying even to the Saracens, revealing nothing of the main reason for his hatred of Roland. He frames everything within the context of a desire for peace, not revenge, and although peace might be a worthy goal in general, it is not the goal of the lord for whom he is serving as ambassador. In subverting Charles's wishes, Ganelon commits another form of treason.

The depth of his treasons becomes clearer as he confirms his plan with Marsile. He has convinced them that Roland is a key Christian asset and must be killed. Moreover, he presents Marsile with an offer that he simply cannot refuse. The poet tells us that "Count Ganelon had thought everything out carefully" [*"Mais li quen Guenes se fut ben purpense"*] (425) and speaks "with great guile" [*"Par grant saver"*] (426). He lies to Marsile, just as the Saracen ambassador has lied to the French. As Cook points out, Ganelon delivers a message which seems to imply that the Franks will not accept Marsile's offer (32). He says instead that if Marsile surrenders and converts, he will be given half of Spain to rule (431-432). In a brilliant stroke, he falsely claims that Roland will rule the other half: "His nephew Roland will have the other half: / What a madman you'll have for a partner!" [*"L'altre meitet avrat Rollant, sis niés: / Mult orguillos parçuner i avrez!"*] (473-4). As this gives Marsile every reason to want Roland dead, Ganelon has thus set up his plan well, if dangerously.

When Marsile reads Charles's actual letter, the offer is, of course, completely different: Marsile is to surrender completely and convert, and to send his own uncle, the Caliph, to Charlemagne (493), or "he will not care what happens to me" [*Altrement ne m'amerat il mie*"], a clear threat. In fact, this is the same warning Ganelon has given to Roland at 306. As Marsile's son angrily points out, what Ganelon has said is "nonsense" [*folie*] (496). It is not only nonsense, but treason. Ganelon has completely misrepresented Charles's wishes. Yet instead of killing the perplexingly deceptive ambassador, Marsile allows Blancandrin to bring Ganelon in for a private chat wherein "they negotiate the wrongful act of treachery" [*purparolent la traïsun seinz dreit*] (511). He offers him the first of many gifts (515), to which Ganelon responds that he "shall not turn it down" [*Je nel desotrei mie*] (518). The first part of the deal is sealed.

In his dealing with Marsile, Ganelon attempts to walk a very fine line: he is sacrificing the entire rear guard in his plot to avenge himself on Roland, but he consistently defends Charlemagne's power and prowess. Just as in the nomination scene, what Ganelon seems unable or unwilling to acknowledge is that he cannot have it both ways. The negotiations between Ganelon and Marsile are like a dance, mirroring the conversation he had earlier with Blancandrin. For three *laissez*, the Saracen begins, asking for information about Charlemagne (520-528; 537-542; 550-556). The refrains always end with the same question: "When will he ever forsake waging war?" [*Quant ert il mais recreanz d'osteier*] (528, 543, 556).³⁸ Ganelon refuses to denigrate Charles, stating that "the Emperor is a man's man" [*l'emperere est ber*] (531). As Marc Bloch

³⁸ The French text for 556 is slightly different: "*Quant ier il mais d'osteier recreant?*"

has explained, “In these centuries of violence and high-strung emotions social ties could easily seem very strong and even show themselves frequently to be so, and yet be ruptured by an outburst of passion” (135). This may explain Ganelon’s simultaneous urge to defend Charlemagne and undermine his military. He makes it clear to Marsile, as he has to Blancandrin, that Roland is the key to Charles’s strength. He tells him that Charlemagne will never stop battle “so long as his nephew lives” [*“tant cum vivet sis niés”*] (544). He also mentions here that Roland, Oliver, and the Twelve Peers are all “in the van with twenty thousand knights” [*“Funt les enguardes a .XX. milie chevalers”*] (548) and that while they are there, “Charles is secure and fears no man” [*“Soüirs est Carles, que nuls home ne crent”*] (549). All this is repeated in the next *laisse* as well (557-562). This is privileged military information; Ganelon has revealed that Charlemagne’s strongest forces are in the weakest position, ready to be ambushed. Again, these actions clearly constitute treason no matter which law is involved. This is Roman *perduellio*, “injury to the state;” *proditio*, “delivering to the enemy of any city, territory or military force;” and “aid and comfort” for the enemy because he is “furnishing information.” But even within feudal law, Ganelon is obviously betraying the interest of his lord by making this deal with the Saracens. In helping the enemy Saracens kill Roland, the Twelve Peers, and anyone else who gets in their way, Ganelon is ultimately damaging Charles’s military strength.

Ganelon’s inability or simple refusal to handle the several strings of his feudal ties both condemns him and provides a window into what he perceives as his justifications. While his main goal might ostensibly be to get revenge on Roland, it comes at the price

of defeating Charles's army. The plot is all Ganelon's, but it bears a striking similarity to the Saracens' initial plan. He instructs Marsile to pretend to surrender, send hostages as proof, and wait for Charles to retreat in victory. Only then should they act:

He will position his rearguard behind him:
His nephew Count Roland will be there, I know,
And worthy and reliable Oliver.
The counts are already dead, believe me!
Charles will see his great pride fall,
He won't have the will to war against you ever again.

[*Sa reregarde lerrat derere sei:
Iert i sis niés, li quens Rollant, ço crei,
E Oliver, li proz e li curteis.
Mort sunt li cunte, se est ki mei en creit!
Carlles verrat sun grant orguill cadeir,
N'avrat talent, que jamais vus guerreit.*] (574-579)

For Ganelon, even describing the plot to Marsile means that "The counts are already dead." What is key here is that thus far, Ganelon has only made the single *desfi* against Roland and the Peers. No one expects Ganelon to plot with the enemy. Remembering what Beaumanoir has said, that "If someone wants to make war on another through his words, he must not make them ambiguous or secret, but so clear and so evident that the person to whom the words are spoken or sent knows that he must be on his guard, and if a person acted otherwise it would be treachery [*traisons*]," it seems clear that arranging the actual death of the twelve without further warning to them is unacceptable (§1675, p. 613). More importantly, he is suggesting defeat for Charles, specifically, who "will see his great pride fall."³⁹ As Cook argues, "No quarrel with Roland, no right Ganelon

³⁹ Gerald Herman uses these lines to make the same point (628). See his "V.578 and the Question of Ganelon's Guilt in *La Chanson de Roland*." *Romance Notes* 14 (1973): 625-628.

possessed, can justify his perversion of his mission to Marsile, his abuse of trust, or the destruction of the Franco-Christian rearguard” (119).

The specific directions he gives Marsile make it clear just how much Ganelon is aware that his revenge against Roland will have greater consequences than the settling of a personal feud. He instructs him:

Send a hundred thousand of your pagans against them,
Let these men join battle with them first.
The men from France will be battered and bruised;
Not that your men won't be massacred too.
Offer them battle a second time in similar fashion:
Roland will not escape from both engagements.

*[De voz paiens lur enveiez .C. milie,
Une batialle lur i rendent cil prmies
La gent de France iert blecee e blesmie;
Nel di por ço, des voz iert la martirie.
Altre bataille lur lirez de meïsme:
De quell que seit Rollant n'estoertrat mie.] (588-593)*

The odds here are stacked in the Saracens' favor: there will be five Saracen soldiers for every one Christian soldier. Roland is the prime target, but Ganelon seems comfortable in the knowledge that many more, including Saracens, will die. He continues:

If one could cause Roland to die,
Then Charles would lose his right arm from his body,
His formidable armies would cease to exist.
Charles would never again muster such great forces,
The Fatherland would remain in peace.

*[Chi purreit faire que Rollant i fust mort,
Dunc perdreit Carles le destre braz del cors,
Si remeindreinent les merveilluses oz.
N'asemblereit jamais Carles si grant esforz,
Tere Major remeindreit en repos.] (596-600)*

Ganelon speaks of peace here, but his point is clearly war. He puts his private war against Roland ahead of his duty to Charles. Mickel notes that “old Germanic law and the later Norman and Anglo-Norman law of the twelfth century are both explicit in forbidding private conflict during military campaigns. Such an action is deemed treason” (“Implications” 223). Again, it is not Roland the insulting nominator who is at stake here: it is Roland the “right arm” of the leader of the Christian army. It is impossible to kill the one without damaging the other.

In addition to the legal and feudal aspects of treason in which Ganelon engages, the poem stacks the deck against him by linking him symbolically to the religious treason of Judas. There is a kiss of treachery, an oath of treason on holy relics, and a bestowal of gifts that evokes the betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver. Throughout the formal enactment of the betrayal, Ganelon is casual, an attitude at odds with the seriousness of his actions. When he has heard Ganelon’s plan, “Marsile kissed him on the neck” [*si l’ad baiset el col*] (601), recalling the kiss with which Judas betrays Jesus.⁴⁰ The treason is stated as explicitly as possible; even Marsile considers what Ganelon is doing to be treason; he tells Roland that he “must swear to me to betray Roland” [*La traïsun me jurrez de Rollant*] (605), to which a jaunty Ganelon replies “Just as you please!” [*Issi seit cum vox plaist!*] (606). The near cheerfulness of his promise to swear to betrayal and death is jarring. Then, “on the relics of his sword Murgleis / He swore the oath of treason, thus he committed a felony” [*Sur les reliques de s’espee Murgleis/ La*

⁴⁰ Marianne Cramer Vos notes that this is an “inverse typology” (21). See “Ganelon’s ‘Mortal Rage.’” *Olifant* 2.1 (1974): 15-26. Ailes makes the same point (58). Stranges is in the minority in claiming that the kiss is not evocative of Judas, but a simple gesture of gratitude (355).

traïsun jurat, e si s'en est forsfait"] (607-608). The sheer audacity of swearing "the oath of treason" on a sword, a symbol of his status as a knight, and a sword with holy relics in it, at that, recalling what ought to be his religious duty to fight the enemy, is stunning.⁴¹ Ailes, in fact, argues that "If any two lines in the poem sum up the awful nature of Ganelon's betrayal it is these. He seems so unaware that he cannot be faithful to God while at the same time betraying his co-religionists" (59). Then the Saracens present a series of gifts to Ganelon, including a sword (620), a helmet (629), and brooches for his wife (637). These last come, tellingly, from Bramimonde, Marsile's wife, who appears here as a loyal wife and Saracen, participating in the ceremony which helps seal Ganelon's treachery.⁴² Her role will change, whereas Ganelon's will not; this is a point to which I will return. Ultimately, figuring Ganelon as Judas, through the gifts he receives for "selling" Roland and the Peers, along with the ritual kissing which accompanies the sale, charges his actions with the most terrible and familiar treachery to a Christian audience. Cook argues that this scene "reminds us that Ganelon is totally wrong and totally perverse" (38). Each successive stage of Ganelon's dealing with the Saracens makes it clear just how far he is willing to go to get his revenge; his treasons are manifold, and he has not even finished yet.

Compounding Ganelon's betrayal, he makes no mention of his plans to anyone upon his return, nor does he repeat or intensify his *desfi*. This is a major stumbling block for those who would argue that Ganelon's *desfi* covers his actions here. Although he

⁴¹The Saracens themselves swear their oaths on a book of "the scriptures of Mohammed and Tervagan" [*"La lei i fut Mahum e Tervagan"*] (611).

⁴² As Kinoshita points out, this is one of the few places in the text where Ganelon's wife (Charlemagne's sister and Roland's mother), "conspicuously absent from the text," appears (92).

promised vengeance against Roland, nothing about a *desfi* allowed a person to arrange for someone else to commit the murder without warning. While the premeditation might strike a modern audience as the primary damning fact, it is the secrecy with which the deal is arranged that makes it treasonous in medieval law. This is not going to be an open battle, or even a duel, but a secret homicide: a murder. At no point does Ganelon mention that he is going to warn Roland or anyone else that there is even going to be a fight. But his work is not done. His treasonous plot depends upon two things: Charlemagne's belief in the fake surrender, and Roland actually being assigned to the rearguard. The first is easy. As Cook notes, Ganelon lies to Charles upon his return "explicitly, at length, and to devastating effect" (40). He is able to convince Charles that Marsile has surrendered by presenting him with the keys to Saragossa (677) and twenty hostages (679) that Marsile has given him. He lies to Charles even more pointedly when he tells him that the Caliph, whom Charles had requested as a hostage specifically, has fled Marsile and drowned (681-690). The Caliph is alive and well, of course, waiting with Marsile's men to attack the rearguard. Even here, then, we see that Ganelon is both lying actively and passively to his lord, withholding crucial information about the enemy.⁴³ Vance notes that Ganelon "is the only figure in the *Song of Roland* in whom the slightest discrepancy between word and deed, between appearance and reality, is ever present" (33). Ganelon takes full advantage of the assumed trust of his lord and the rest of the men.

Having accomplished the first step, Ganelon embarks on the second. Here, he relies not on his powers of deception, but on his familiarity with feudal customs and his

⁴³ Even Stranges admits the treachery here (363).

knowledge of Roland's character. Charlemagne asks for nominations for the rearguard, the group most likely to face trouble, in a scene that is obviously meant to recall the earlier nomination process (Haidu 73).⁴⁴ In what thus seems like an appropriate response to his own nomination, Ganelon suggests "Roland, this stepson of mine, / You have no other knight with such great courage" ["*Rollant, cist miens fillastre, / N'avez baron de si grant vasselage*"] (743-44). The reaction is strong and swift. Everyone knows that this is a position of great danger, and it is conceivable that to the French, this may seem like the culmination of Ganelon's *desfi*. Charlemagne's reaction is pointed: "When the King hears this, he looks at him fiercely, / He said to him: 'You're a living devil, / A deadly frenzy has entered your body!'" ["*Quant l'ot li reis, fierement le regarder, / Si li ad dit: 'Vos estes figs diables, / El cors vos est entrée mortel rage!'*"] (745-747). It is clear to all that Ganelon has manipulated the system to ensure that Roland will be in a dangerous position. As Ailes notes, "Ganelon's treachery only works because he can read Roland's character and therefore anticipate what he will do" (28).⁴⁵ Roland himself takes the news calmly, at first: "Sir stepfather, I am much indebted to you, / You have nominated me for the rearguard. / Charles, the king who rules France, shall not lose, / So long as I'm aware of it, a single palfrey or war-horse" ["*Sire parastre, mult vos dei aveir cher, / La reregarde avez sur mei jugiet. / N'i perdrat Carles, li reis ki France tient, / Men escientre, palefreid ne destrer*"] (753-756). Unlike his stepfather, Roland's first response, not his last, is to reiterate his loyalty to his lord. What is interesting here is that everyone

⁴⁴ Vance notes that "To the last detail, revenge in this poem is symmetrical," with the assonance, syllables, and actions of the two nomination scenes being the same (18).

⁴⁵ Vance makes the same point: "Ganelon nominates Roland in full confidence that his honor will oblige him to accept" (5).

seems to know that Ganelon is up to something when he nominates Roland, but no one knows exactly what he is planning. This is another way in which Ganelon's plan is clearly treasonous. Haidu remarks that "The quality that makes of vengeance—or any killing—a judiciable offense is that of being covert and not preceded by adequate warning: that is the quality that constitutes both murder and treason" (160). He, like Ganelon, seems to think that the initial *desfi* was "adequate warning," and that the attack is thus not "covert." Yet Ganelon does not give any indication himself that this nomination has more to it than he has stated; at this point, the Franks think that the Saracens have accepted Charles's order of submission. They have no reason to fear a specific attack.

It is telling that even without knowing the specific details of Ganelon's plot, Roland responds to the nomination in terms of the symbolic break Ganelon made with Charles, not in terms of the challenge made to him personally. In the next *laisse*, the poet tells us that

Hearing that he will be in the rearguard,
Roland spoke angrily to his stepfather:
'Oh! You dirty son of a bitch,
Did you expect me to drop the gauntlet to the ground
The way you let the staff fall before Charles?'

[*Quant ot Rolllant qu'il ert en la reregarde,
Ireement parlat a sun parastre:
'Ahi! Culvert, malvais hom de put aire,
Quias le guant me caïst en la place,
Cume fist a tei le gastun devant Carle?'*] (761-765)

Roland's response here, like that above, focuses primarily on his role as a loyal vassal to Charles. Roland will not "let the staff fall" as his stepfather did. Yet this passage also

highlights a key point: while everyone remembers what Ganelon has done, and everyone interpreted it as a bad omen, no one seems to remember or care about his actual spoken *desfi*. The scope of Ganelon's anger is totally unclear to the Franks. He still went on the mission, and for all the Franks know, he completed it faithfully. No one questions his report, indicating that everyone still trusts him. No one, at this point, has understood Ganelon's *desfi* for what it was, and Ganelon does nothing to clarify it. He is still being treated as a member of the community, despite defying the Twelve Peers and dropping the gauntlet. Even as Roland recalls the drop and its implications, he still has full trust in what Ganelon has reported. Accepting his own charge, he states that "So help me, they'll never have cause to reproach me / That I dropped it the way Ganelon did" [*Men escientre, nel me reproverunt / Que il me chedet cum fist a Guenelun*] (768-69). His focus is on his own honor, not on the possibility that Ganelon has besmirched his by ensuring that leading the rearguard is not just a dangerous position, but a deadly one.

Ganelon's manipulation of the feudal system is masterful, and his plan of betrayal succeeds because of it. Upset because now that Roland has been nominated, he must go, Charles "cannot prevent the tears welling from his eyes" [*Ne poet muër que des oilz ne plurt*] (773). The king himself is bound by feudal customs. As Naimon points out, despite the fact that "Count Roland is very angry" [*il est mult irascut*] (777), the nomination must stand: "No knight in your service can ever change that" [*N'avez baron ki jamais la remut*] (779). Cook explains that "What Naimon is trying to do is persuade Charles to get on with a process that no one can reverse, in a situation that cannot be changed without arbitrary violation of a set of rules more important than the immediate

circumstances” (52). This is a key point. Neither Roland nor Charles is above the rules, though Charles offers Roland extra men here (785). Only Ganelon transgresses the bounds of custom.

At this point, the poem offers two narrative confirmations of the terrible scope of Ganelon’s betrayal. For one thing, Charles has a dream that

France will be destroyed by Ganelon.
Last night an angel appeared to me,
I dreamed that Ganelon was shattering the lance in my hands,
Now he has nominated my nephew for the rearguard.
I have left him exposed in dangerous country.
God! If I lose him, I’ll not find anyone capable of replacing him!

*[Par Guenelun serat destruite France.
Enoit m’avint un avisiun d’angele
Que entre mes puinz me depeçout ma hanste,
Chi ad juget mis nes a reregarde
Jo l’ai lesset en une estrange marche,
Deus! Se jol pert, ja n’en avrai escange!]* (835-840)

This is not legal proof, of course. But Charles can see that Ganelon’s anger will have great consequences. The whole of France is at stake here. Roland is clearly indispensable to Charles, who bemoans the fact that he cannot possibly “find anyone capable of replacing him.” Even the loss of just Roland would be catastrophic. The dream, a sign from God, shows Charles what the audience already knows; Ganelon’s treason will be a severe blow to the whole Christian army.

Highlighting the circumstances and the dire consequences of his betrayal, the poem then juxtaposes a catalog of the gifts Ganelon received with scenes of the Saracen troops readying for battle. The poet’s condemnation of Ganelon is clear in *laisse* 68. Tuoldus sums up Ganelon’s actions: “The villain Ganelon has betrayed him, / He

received huge bribes from the pagan king, / Gold and silver, silk cloths and brocades, / Mules and horses, camels and lions” [*“Guenes li fels en ad fait traïsun, / Del rei paien en ad oïd granz duns, / Or e argent, palies e ciclatuns, / Muls e chevals e cameilz e leuns”*] (843-847). This reminder of all the material wealth Ganelon has gained is set against the real price; the poet describes Marsile gathering his troops for the attack on the rearguard (848-857).

The final step in Ganelon’s treachery is his attempt to keep Charles from helping Roland once the battle has been lost and Roland has decided to blow the horn.⁴⁶ The juxtaposition of the two scenes, the bloody and dying Roland using his last breath to blow the horn, and the Franks straining to hear it and interpret it, powerfully underscores the gravity of Ganelon’s betrayal. Upon Charles’s first claim to hear the horn, Ganelon dissuades him: “If anyone else said this, it would seem a great lie!” [*“S’altre le desist, ja semblast grant mençunge!”*] (1760). Roland blows the horn again: “Count Roland, with pain and suffering, / With great agony sounds his oliphant. / Bright blood comes gushing from his mouth, / The temple of his brain has burst” [*“Li quens Rollant, par peine e par ahans, / Par grant dolor sunet sun olifan. / Par mi la buch en salt fors le cler sancs, / De sun cervel le temple in est rumpant”*] (1761-1764). Charles, disturbed, argues that Roland would “never sound it if he weren’t fighting” [*“Unc nel sunast se ne fust cumbatant”*] (1769). Yet Ganelon insists, for a whole *laisse*, that Roland “sounds his horn all day long for a mere hare. / He’s showing off now before his peers” [*“Pun un sul levre rat tute jur*

⁴⁶ My focus on treason does not allow a discussion of the famous debate between Oliver and Roland about when and why it is the right time to blow the horn to let the rest of the army know that there is a battle going on. Vance notes, though, that there is a parallel in this debate to the questions surrounding Ganelon’s guilt and trial: “In the quarrel between Roland and Oliver, the poet points again to the weakness of the system whose glories he celebrates” (51).

cornant. / Devant ses pers vait il ore gabant”] (1780-81). Ailes argues that this strategy is “somewhat desperate” (62), but it does have the desired effect of keeping Roland and the rearguard in danger for longer. On the other hand, it also has the unintended consequence of finally convincing Charles and his men that Ganelon is up to something. When Roland blows the horn once again, Naimés finally joins Charles’s side and argues that “The one who begs you to pretend you have heard nothing has betrayed him” [*“Cil l’at traît ki vos en roevet feindre”]* (1792). Naimés has recognized what their gut reactions told them when Ganelon nominated Roland to lead the rearguard. Interestingly, he frames it as Ganelon’s betrayal of Roland, not Charles. At this point, however, no one knows the full extent of the tragedy, that it is not just Roland, but the whole rearguard that has been betrayed.

Charles has Ganelon seized, and though he does not execute him, he has him subjected to a humiliating hold. Charles has a clear presumption of Ganelon’s guilt, realizing what must have happened at this point, and thus makes the punishment as insulting as possible. He hands Ganelon over to the cooks, whose power over him at this point signals just how far Ganelon has fallen. The cooks may be lowly servants, but they are loyal. Charles instructs the kitchen master to “Guard him well, as befits the felon that he is! / He has betrayed my household” [*“Ben le me garde, si cume tel felon! / De ma maisnee ad faite traïsun”]* (1819-20). Charles’s words are instructive; he has clearly understood Ganelon’s actions as a personal betrayal. Roland was his nephew, his kin as well as his vassal. Their treatment of Ganelon is violent, emasculating, and dehumanizing:

One hundred of the cooks then
pluck out his beard and his moustache,
Each strikes him four blows with his fist;
They thrash him soundly with rods and sticks,
They put an iron collar around his neck,
And they chain him like a bear.
They placed him shamefully on a sumpter.
They guard him until they deliver him back to Charles.

*[Ici li peilent la barbe e les gernuns,
Cascus le fiert .IIII. colps de sun puign;
Ben le batirent a fuz e a bastuns,
E si li metent el col un caeignun,
Si l'encaeinent altresì cum un urs.
Sur un sumer l'unt mis a deshonor.
Tant le guardent quell rendent a Charlun.] (1823-29)*

The utter degradation of the punishment speaks to and helps construct the utter horror of the crime itself. Every aspect is an insult, an indication of the lowered status he now occupies as a presumed traitor. He is guarded by cooks, not knights like himself. The plucking of his facial hair is clearly meant as an attack on his masculinity, and the collar and chain signify the absolute bestial nature of what he has done. The bear imagery links him inevitably to Charles's earlier dream, as Marianne Cramer Vos notes (18-19). He is kept here "shamefully," indefinitely. This hints at the coming brutality of his execution, but it primarily highlights the abhorrent nature of his crime. A suspected traitor deserves the worst.

Aude

The poem does not move immediately to the trial, however. As Kinoshita notes, Ganelon's trial is surrounded by episodes in which the two female characters in the poem, Aude and Bramimonde, appear (99). Aude seems primarily an object that bonds men, namely her brother Oliver, and her betrothed, Roland. We hear of her only when

Oliver threatens to withhold her from Roland, signaling the break in their friendship (1719-1721). Their subsequent reconciliation and death, though, make this a moot point. We actually see her only once, when Charlemagne has to break the news to her that Roland has died, and offers to give her his own son in exchange (3713-3716). In a clear rejection of this idea, however, Aude refuses the new match and falls down dead, telling Charles that “This offer seems strange to me. / May it not please God, his angels, and his saints / That I remain alive after Roland!” [*“Cest mot mei est estrange. / Ne place Deu ne ses seinze ne ses angles / Après Rollant que jo vive remaigne!”*] (3717-3719).⁴⁷

Thus, the one scene in which she makes an appearance is crucial for several reasons. For one, it takes place right before Ganelon’s trial, a reminder of how widespread the consequences of his actions are. For another, though, her absolute loyalty to Roland is in marked contrast to Ganelon’s treachery. She refuses to betray Roland’s memory even after he has died, evincing a loyalty that, while perhaps disturbing, mirrors Roland’s loyalty to Charles and highlights Ganelon’s disloyalty.⁴⁸ At the same time, she functions as an interesting parallel to Ganelon in that she also defies Charlemagne. She has, in a way, been cheated of what she had been promised, marriage to the greatest of his heroes. Charles’s offer, noble as it is, makes no sense to her, “seems strange.” Yet she

⁴⁷ Lynn T. Ramey points out that “Aude’s collapse is a highly ambivalent moment for women. It can be read as Aude’s exercise of her only option—suicide—to control her destiny or, alternatively, as an illustration of the death-or-submission bind that renders female power and agency a self-annihilating act” (235). See her “The Death of Aude and the Conversion of Bramimonde: Border Pedagogy and Medieval Feminist Criticism,” in *Approaches to Teaching the Song of Roland*. Eds. William W. Kibler and Leslie Zarker Morgan. New York: Modern Language Association, 2006. 232-237. While I recognize the ambivalence, my focus here is on death as a viable option to treachery.

⁴⁸ Kinoshita makes the same point: “in dying, she demonstrates the incontrovertibility of her loyalty to Roland just as Roland had acted out his fidelity to Charles” (100).

asserts her will, unlike Ganelon, without hurting a single other person. She simply removes herself from society, period: “She died on the spot” [*“Semper est morte”*] (3721). This is an option the insulted Ganelon does not consider. Instead, Ganelon chooses to pretend as if he is still a committed member of Charlemagne’s forces, all the while working from within to destroy them. Aude’s death, coming right before Ganelon’s trial, highlights the horror of his deliberate treason. As we will see, the poem’s other female character, Bramimonde, demonstrates another alternative to Ganelon’s conduct after his trial

The Trial

As the trial begins, both Ganelon’s guilt and the judicial process seem clear.⁴⁹ Everything points to a guilty verdict, and the audience knows full well that Ganelon deserves the name traitor. But despite the shameful treatment Ganelon receives before his trial, he is able to cut a noble and compelling figure in his own defense. The trial takes several unexpected turns, and not one but three different definitions of treason are proposed: one by Charles in his accusation, one by Ganelon in his defense, and one by Thierry in the countercharge to his fellow barons. Cook argues that “The complications of the Trial stem not from any ambiguity in what Ganelon has done or uncertainty about the guilt he bears, but from a renewed emphasis on the threat to feudal principles that human weakness and perversity can pose” (113). Just as no one seemed willing or able

⁴⁹ In an interesting although ultimately unconvincing article, Mary Jane Schenck argues that “It would be more accurate to call it ‘the punishment of Ganelon’ because the question of judging him pales in comparison to the apparent need to see the traitor harshly punished” (591). See her “Spectacles of Violence: The Trials of Ganelon” in *“De sens rassis”: Essays in Honor of Rupert T. Pickens*. Eds. Keith Busby, Bernard Guidot, and Logan E. Whalen. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. 589-603.

to believe Ganelon's threats during his *desfi*, no one—almost no one—seems to want to face the truth of what he has done.

The section on Ganelon's trial, as Eugene Vance has pointed out, "is not only spatially and temporally detached from the rest of the action in the poem, but narratively, as well" (82).⁵⁰ The poem marks the shift to the trial quite abruptly: "Now begins the trial of Ganelon" [*Des ore cumencet le plait de Guenelun*] (3704). Before the trial even begins, though, he is publically punished once again. The presumption of guilt is once again clear. What is different is that by this time, Charlemagne and the Franks have seen the destruction for themselves. Roland, Oliver, the Twelve Peers, and the rearguard are gone. The trial is held at Aix, just like the poet has promised and Charles's dreams have foretold:

Wicked Ganelon, in iron chains,
Is in the citadel in front of the palace.
The serfs have tied him to a stake,
They bind his hands with deerhide thongs.
They thrash him soundly with sticks and rods.
He deserved no other treatment.
He awaits his trial there in great pain.

[*Guenes li fels*⁵¹, *en caeines de fer*,
En la cite est devant le paleis.
A un estache l'unt atachet cil serf,
Les mains li lient a curreies de cerf.
Tres ben le batent a fuz e a jamelz,
N'ad deservit que alter ben i ait.
A grant dulur iloeec atent sun plait.] (3735-3741)

⁵⁰ Different versions of the poem do include various versions of the trial itself. For a discussion of these, see Mickel "Ganelon after Oxford." *Olifant* 13.2 (1988): 73-82.

⁵¹ Brault translates this as "Wicked Ganelon," but "*Guenes li fels*" can also translate easily as "Ganelon the felon," or "Ganelon the traitor."

Chained like a wild beast, Ganelon is put on display right “in front of the palace.” He is a prisoner, a public villain, dealt with only by the lowest echelons of society: first the cooks, and now the serfs. As Jones points out, being “whipped by some serfs” is “a double ignominy because both the agents and the punishment suited a man of low degree” (60). The poet is clear that this is not excessive or unnecessary punishment: Ganelon “deserved” nothing else.

Haidu makes the excellent point that “In the trial scene of the *Chanson de Roland*, almost none of the characteristics of our judicial codes can be found. Here, the guilt of the accused is announced at the beginning of the proceedings, which do nothing but repeat the same assertions announced upon the actor’s first entrance onto the scene of the text” (152-153). The tag, “who committed the act of treason,” is indeed the same one he is given at line 178. The poet frames the trial within the context of Ganelon’s sure guilt: “Now begin the allegations and the countercharges / Concerning Ganelon, who committed the act of treason. / The Emperor had him dragged before him” [*Des ore cumencet le plait e les noveles / De Guenelun, ki traïsun ad faite. / Li emperere devand sei l’ad fait traire*] (3747-3749). Ganelon is not allowed a shred of dignity. Charles lays out the charges:

He was with me in the army all the way to Spain,
He took twenty thousand of my Frenchmen away from me,
My nephew, whom I shall never see again,
And noble and worthy Oliver;
He betrayed the Twelve Peers for gain.

*[Il fut en l’ost tresque en Espagne od mei
Si me tolit .XX. milie de mes Franceis
E mun nevoid, que jamais ne verreiz,*

*E Oliver, li proz e li cureis;
Les .XII. pers ad trait por aveir.] (3752-3756)*

The order in which Charles enumerates the charges is revealing. To begin with, he notes that Ganelon “was with me in the army all the way to Spain.” In framing the accusation, then, Charles deliberately points out that Ganelon had been a loyal vassal; this, he implies, makes what follows even worse. Ganelon lost him twenty thousand men, including Roland, Oliver, and the Twelve Peers. Charles emphasizes the sheer number of his dead soldiers first, underscoring the massive damage to his army that Ganelon’s actions have caused. Interestingly, he adds the motive: “for gain.” Though the audience is privy to the many gifts Ganelon received from the Saracens, this is not a motive that has been suggested before.⁵² It is unclear just how Charles has any idea about this, but what seems more important than the motive is the staggering loss of men, all at the hands of someone who was trusted, someone who was in a position to have “betrayed” them in the first place.

Ganelon, however, firmly denies that what he has done was treasonous in any way. He not only confesses to planning Roland’s death, but seems proud of it. In the trial, as Vance notes, “the poet probes the fundamental premises of order in feudal society by dramatizing the conflict between a vassal’s obligation to his personal honor and to his lord” (3). Ganelon has clearly prioritized his honor above any consideration of Charles. Regarding Roland’s death, Ganelon claims proudly, “I’ll be damned if I hide it! / Roland wronged me in a matter concerning gold and wealth, / Which is why I sought his death

⁵² This may simply be another way of figuring Ganelon as Judas. As the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne’s use of the motif could easily carry those associations. The poet has also ascribed this motive to Ganelon (845-847).

and his suffering; / But I submit no treason was committed here” [*“Fel seie se jol ceil! / Rollant me forfist en or e en aveir, / Pur que jo quis sa mort e sun destreit; / Mais traïsun nule n’en i otreï”*] (3757-60). The first of his “countercharges” against Roland is strange, unsupported by any detail in the text. Nothing has been suggested about monetary disputes between Roland and Ganelon. But again, what is more interesting is the order in which he lists his justifications. Rather than relying at first on his open defiance, Ganelon, like Charles, focuses on monetary gain; this, perhaps, is another way of linking him to Judas, who also gained money from a betrayal which was based more on fear and misplaced priorities than simple greed.

Ganelon continues to justify his actions by arguing that Roland did him several other harms, and thus he had no choice but to defy him.⁵³ The bulk of his defense therefore rests on his claim that his *desfi* allowed him to plan Roland’s death. He gives an impassioned description of the wrong to his honor that Roland committed:

My lords, I was with the Emperor in the army,
 I served him in good faith and in friendship.
 His nephew Roland conceived a hatred for me,
 He marked me for death and suffering.
 I was sent as a messenger to King Marsile,
 I came back safely by using my head.
 I issued a formal challenge to that fighter Roland,
 To Oliver and to all their companions;
 Charles and his noble knights heard it.
 I avenged myself, but there is no treason here.

*[Seignors, jo fui en l’ost avoec l’empereür,
 Serveie le par feid e par amur
 Rollant sis niés me coillit en haür*

⁵³ Several scholars make the assumption that there must have been a preexisting tension between the two, or Ganelon would not have reacted so strongly to the nomination in the first place (Hall 263; Ailes 32; Vance 5). There does not seem to be any need for any such assumption. Ganelon is a talented liar, and there is no reason to think that he is telling the truth here.

*Si me jugat a mort e a dulur
Message fui al rei Marsiliun
Par mun saveir vinc jo a guarisun.
Jo desfiai Rollant le poigneor
E Oliver e tuiz lur cumpaignun;
Carles l'oïd e si nobilie baron.
Venget m'en sui, mais n'i ad traïsun.] (3769-3779)*

He does not deny that he wanted to and did plan harm to Roland; however, as Peter Haidu points out, Ganelon “denies categorically that, in doing so, he committed treason” (157). Ganelon’s multiple claims here are the crux of the issue of his guilt. He claims that he “served” Charles “in good faith and in friendship,” but this is clearly untrue, whether considering the twisted mission to Marsile, the direct lies to Charles, or the killing of thousands of his men. Grossly euphemizing his dealings with the Saracens, he says lightly that he only returned “by using my head.” He focuses on the public break with Roland and the peers, driven by what he understood as Roland’s “hatred,” and his plan for Ganelon’s “death and suffering.” This, he argues, removes his actions from the sphere of treason and places them within the realm of allowed vengeance. As Gerald Herman points out, “One is given the impression that he has only unbounded admiration for the emperor, and his claim... that he remained at all times a faithful vassal of Charlemagne’s—his efforts to destroy Roland notwithstanding—seems almost convincing in retrospect” (627). Yet there is something missing here; Ganelon is still lying, still deceiving. He never once admits the details or full scope of his plan.

Interestingly, this defense works, at least initially. An anonymous baron suggests that they ask for leniency (3800); they propose to “dismiss the charge and implore the King / To let Ganelon off this time” [*Laisum le plait e si preium le rei / Que Guenelun*

cleimt quite caste feiz”] (3799-3800).⁵⁴ This phrasing is telling; they are not necessarily stating that Ganelon is innocent, but that he should be let off the hook.⁵⁵ If anything, this seems to imply that they actually think he is guilty. They rationalize the decision by reminding Charlemagne that “Roland is dead, you’ll never see him again, / He can’t be recovered for gold or for any other compensation” [*Morz est Rollant, jamais nel revereiz, / N’ert recuvret por or ne por aveir*] (3802-3803). As they do not mention Oliver, the Twelve Peers, or the other twenty thousand men here, they seem to have bought into Ganelon’s version of events: this was a private matter between two men.

Charles, who remembers not only Roland but the rest of the rearguard, is shocked at the verdict. The barons tell him that he should “Let him serve you henceforth in good faith and in friendship” [*Puis si vos servet par feid e par amor*] (3810), echoing Ganelon’s own language. The barons seem to have decided that Ganelon’s revenge was authorized, and that nothing practical can be done at this point. Yet in saying that Charles should accept Ganelon “henceforth in good faith and in friendship,” they seem to acknowledge implicitly that what his actions up to the trial have been less than satisfactory. This is not enough for Charles, who considers the barons as something like accomplices after the fact: “You are compounding this felony against me!” [*Vos estes mi felun!*] (3814). We see here that Charles is still considering Ganelon’s act to be treason directed specifically at him. Haidu claims that Charles is simply naïve not to have

⁵⁴ Margaret Burrell points out that this is not technically an acquittal, simply a dismissing of the charges (84, note 3). See “Ganelon’s Act of Treason.” *Olifant* 4.2 (1976): 84-86.

⁵⁵ As Mickel points out, though, their decision may be influenced by “the threat of Pinabel” (*Ganelon* 63). While they are deliberating, Ganelon’s fierce kinsman Pinabel is there, watching: “They keep very quiet because of Pinabel” [*Pur Pinabel se cuntient plus quei*] (3797). Halverson makes the same point, arguing that “With deference to the formidable Pinabel, the judges skirt the issue altogether” (667).

realized what the outcome would be: “Yet what else could have been expected but that a feudal court composed of feudal vassals would return a verdict in feudal law which recognizes feudal privilege?” (161). Just as in the rearguard nomination scene, Charles is powerless to change what his barons have decreed.⁵⁶ The barons have spoken, and Charles can do nothing about it: “Because of the vexation he feels, he bewails his miserable lot” [*Al doel qu’il ad si se cleimet caitifs*] (3817). This is another example of how feudal custom constrains everyone, no matter the level.

Charles’s lack of action here also problematizes a main part of Haidu’s argument. He argues that “Charles, with some help, is about to enact a political revolution by a juridical *coup d’etat*” (155).⁵⁷ But Charles is obviously not doing anything or taking matters into his own hands any more than he did during the rearguard nomination scene. As the only time he tries to bend his barons to his will, the ambassador nomination scene, ends badly, he seems to have learned his lesson. On this occasion, he does not have to; he finds support from the unlikely source of the meek knight Thierry. Haidu is correct in that Thierry’s argument does not make use of many of the available definitions of treason; he does not mention anything about Ganelon helping the enemy or lying on his mission. Moreover, his claims are only tangentially related to those with which Charles opens the trial. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the argument does not have real merit, or that it is based solely on Roman law. As Thierry’s explanation proves,

⁵⁶ The key seems to be that Charles can reject self-nominations (as he does in the ambassadorial nomination scene) but not the nominations or decisions of the barons regarding each other.

⁵⁷ Cf. Burrell, who argues that if this is a function of the concept of *maimbour*, in which Roland is under Charlemagne’s personal protection, then the trial is not taking a step forward but a step back into pre-feudal customs (85).

it is not primarily the external aspects of Ganelon's actions that matters. In fact, the Saracens are not even mentioned. It is the internal betrayal, the attack on a fellow soldier of Charles's that is the problem. Thierry disagrees with his fellow barons,⁵⁸ arguing quite simply that any hatred Ganelon might have had for Roland, and any challenge he might have made, ostensibly including a *desfi*, did not give Ganelon the right to harm a soldier of Charlemagne's:

Even if Roland had wronged Ganelon,
The fact that he was serving you was sufficient to safeguard him!
Ganelon committed a felony because he betrayed him,
He perjured himself and broke his oath of fealty to you.
For this reason I condemn him to hang and to die.

[*Que que Rollant a Guenelun forfesist,
Vostre servise l'en doüst bien fuarir!
Guenes est fels d'ïço qu'il le traît,
Vers vos s'en est parjurez e malmis.
Pur ço le juzjo a pendre e a murir.*] (3827-31)

Thierry makes no claim about what Roland may or may not have done to Ganelon or his honor. He simply points out three simple truths: Roland was serving in Charles's army, and this should have been a "safeguard;" Ganelon "perjured himself" by lying to Charles; and, perhaps most damning, "he broke his oath of fealty." In his work on *Roland*, Haidu reads Ganelon's whole trial scene as one unannounced change of the law after another, a constant attempt not just to condemn Ganelon unfairly, but for Charles to consolidate his power. Haidu insists that Thierry's claim, that Roland's position as Charles's man should have ensured his protection, is "entirely outside his [Ganelon's] argument, outside the

⁵⁸ William W. Kibler notes that Thierry resembles Roland in this: "both stand alone against the majority opinion, and both are ultimately proven right" (54). See "Roland vs. the Barons" in *Voices of Conscience: Essays on Medieval and Modern French Literature in Memory of James D. Powell and Rosemary Hodgins*. Ed. Raymond J. Cormier. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977. 53-60.

world he inhabits” (164). Haidu states flatly that “In feudal terms, this line [3828] makes no sense whatsoever” (164).⁵⁹ However, these are all clearly treasonous acts, whether the lens is Roman, Germanic, or feudal. Ganelon did lie, committing perjury repeatedly, in his report to Charles after the mission, his attempt to deny the true meaning of Roland’s horn, and the statements at his trial. Ganelon did break his fealty oath by not acting in his lord’s best interest during the mission. Even if his *desfi* covered his attack on Roland and the Twelve Peers, he never made a break with the rest of the rearguard. Thierry’s challenge to the barons is not, thus, so much Haidu’s “*coup d’etat*” as a pragmatic (and brave) challenge to what would have been a miscarriage of justice. The trial scene, thus, is key to any discussion of treason in the Middle Ages because it reveals the complex network of ideas and associations in which treason evolves.

Ultimately, it is not Charles who makes the final decision on Ganelon’s guilt, but God himself. Thierry beats Pinabel in a miraculous *judicium dei*, or judgment of God (3926-3931).⁶⁰ Having seen proof that their initial verdict was completely wrong, the French decide that not only Ganelon but his thirty pledges must die: “Not a damn one of them shall live!” [*Ja mar en vivrat uns!*] (3951). They are hanged (3958).⁶¹ Haidu sees this as another sign that Charles’s transition into monarch, from simple feudal leader, is

⁵⁹ Haidu would exonerate Ganelon, who “will now be judged in terms of a new law that has just been formulated by a textual nonentity, a Thierry who has no genealogy in preceding textuality” (166).

⁶⁰ R.H. Bloch explains that “The judicial duel belongs to the series of ordeals common to any primitive sense of justice in which legal process remains indistinguishable from divine process, human will from godly will, positive law from divine law. Historically, it came to France from the Germanic tribes mentioned by Tacitus and Caesar...” (18).

⁶¹ Mickel points out that hanging was “a traditional means of execution for treason” (“30 Pleges” 299). The hanging of pledges, though, was unusual. Mickel suggests that it harkens back to the Germanic practice of holding compurgators, akin to character witnesses, as culpable as the defendant (“30 Pleges” 297). See his “The 30 Pleges for Ganelon.” *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 293-304.

complete, and thus “it is the Franks...who thereby decide their own submission to a new legal modality” (169). He argues that this willingness to subject themselves to a new form of government is a crucial element of the sovereign’s consolidation of power: “Only if the subordination of the warring class is a willing one, an accepted submission to superior authority, can the new social compact and its new political order have a chance at success and survival” (171). Yet their reaction to the battle is not the change Haidu suggests; the barons have always considered Charles their “superior authority.” While this shift was no doubt happening at the time of the poem’s composition, there is nothing in the treatment of treason, or Ganelon, in the poem that suggests that such a change is happening in the text itself. The Franks are not endorsing “a new legal modality,” but righting a wrong that they themselves have helped to perpetrate. Charles does not force Thierry to challenge the other barons; Thierry sees their mistake himself. Nor does Charles coach Thierry in his argument; Thierry (wisely) ignores the mention of financial gain and focuses on the basic elements of treason: deception and breaches of loyalty to one’s lord.

The basis for Ganelon’s guilt is clear in the final moral the poem gives before Ganelon is formally punished. It is stunningly simple, but encompasses the heart of anxiety about treason: “Anyone who betrays a man brings on his own death and that of others too” [“*Ki hume traïst sei ocit e altroi*”] (3959). There is nothing of hierarchy here, just a mention of simple betrayal. Ganelon is punished:

They have four war-horses brought forward,
Then they tie his feet and his hands.
The horses are fiery and swift,
Four sergeants urge them on

Toward a stream that crosses a field.
Ganelon went to his utter perdition:
All his ligaments are stretched as taut as can be,
And his whole body is torn limb from limb,
The bright blood spatters on the green grass.
Ganelon died as befits a dirty miscreant,
Any man who betrays another must not be allowed to brag about it.

*[Quatre destrers funt amener avant,
Puis si li lient e les piez e les mains.
Li cheval sunt orgoillus e curreant,
Quatre serjanz les acoillent devant
Devers un ewe ki est en mi un camp.
Guenes est turnet a perdicium grant:
Trestuit si nerf mult li sunt estendant
E tuit li member de sun cors derumpant,
Sur l'erbe verte en espant li cler sanc.
Guenes est more cume fel recreant,
Hom ki traist alter ne nest dreiz qu'il s'en vant.]* (3964-3974)

This was not necessarily the typical punishment for treason in the Germanic tradition; Mickel notes that although the sentence was usually death, “the manner of death is not stipulated” (224). Haidu uses the work of Michel Foucault to read this scene, noting the similarity to the opening of his *Discipline and Punish*, which describes the gruesome punishment of a much later French traitor (171). Haidu paraphrases Foucault’s explanation of how power is translated through punishment to conclude his argument that Ganelon has been the victim of a shift in the ruling structures of government: “the purposeful and differentiated production of pain inscribes in the subjected body the signifying economy of power. And—in both cases—the power that is (re)activated is the power of the state over and against its assembled subject” (172).⁶² Treason simply cannot

⁶²Andrew Cowell notes that in medieval literature, “traitors and ‘Saracens’ typically constitute full-scale Others, who are killed mercilessly in many instances” (109). See his *The Medieval Warrior Aristocracy: Gifts, Violence, Performance, and the Sacred*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007.

be tolerated in any society, much less one based on a system of oaths, honor, and mutual trust. Felons, those who work through deception, must be forced to open up, and the secrecy through which they accomplished their treachery, punished by the literal tearing open of the body.

However, while the mechanisms of power might be the same in both cases (that of Foucault's prisoner and Ganelon), the wielder of that power is not. Although this is described as Charles's "vengeance" [*venjance*] (3975), the poem never states that Charles orders the quartering; it is the Franks who "insisted more than all the others / That Ganelon die with excruciating pain" [*Sor tuit li alter l'unt otriet li Franc / Que Guenes moerget par merveillus ahan*]. As Ailes suggests, "Ganelon's fate is something of an exemplum, a warning" (102). But it is a warning conceived by the Franks. Haidu's argument rests on the assumption that Charles is able to manipulate the barons into fulfilling his wishes, but this is an assumption without basis in the text.

Bramimonde

The final comment on Ganelon's treason, however, may not be his punishment, but the conversion of the Saracen queen Bramimonde. Kinoshita argues that "The conversion of the Saracen queen provides closure to this song of feudal loyalty and heroic sacrifice" (101). Bramimonde has shown a spirited response to her side's defeats throughout the poem, moving from the dutiful, gift-giving wife of Marsile early in the poem to an outspoken, sarcastic critic of her own side. Upon Marsile's return after the tide has turned, she "leads the type of revolt usually attributed to male Saracens who wreak punishment upon their gods" (Kinoshita 93). They shout at their idols and tear

them down (2580-2590). A few lines later, she complains that “Our gods committed a great crime / When they failed him [Marsile] in battle this morning” [*“Li nostre deu i unt fait felonie, / Ki en bataille or matin le faillirent”*] (2600-2601). By the time the great Saracen Baligant arrives with his reinforcements, and his men greet her in the name of Mohammed, Bramimonde has had enough: “What rubbish I hear! / Those gods of ours have given up the fight” [*“Or oi mult grant folie! / Cist nostre deu sunt en recreantise”*] (2714-2715). As Kinoshita points out, “For a society which articulated faith and feudal loyalty in the same discourse, nothing could be more damning than Bramimonde’s accusation of *recreantise*” (94). Bramimonde’s faith in her gods and her men has been slipping throughout the poem, and she is vocal and clear in her frustration and dissatisfaction. This is, in a way, her version of the *desfi*.⁶³

Thus Bramimonde also functions as an interesting parallel to Ganelon: both are frustrated by their superiors, and both make their unhappiness clear. Yet although she seems to “have given up the fight” herself, nothing in the poem has signaled that she has actually converted to Christianity; she simply seems to be moving away from Islam. However, convert she does, at Charles’s request, notably,⁶⁴ but also “out of sheer

⁶³ Kinoshita makes the important point that “This is not to say, however, that Bramimonde can be recuperated as a feminist subject. Her display of self-determination is less an act of feminist agency than part of a scripted role in the construction of Frankish Christianity” (101). I am, thus, not trying to argue that Bramimonde’s actions or complaints are noble in themselves, simply that they provide an often overlooked alternative to treachery.

⁶⁴ Ramey argues that “The Saracen queen who appears several times as an opinionated, outspoken visionary ends the tale in brainwashed silence. Charlemagne speaks Bramimonde’s will in a way that Marsile never did” (237). While the “silence” is undisputable, the “brainwashed” may be too strong a term, as Bramimonde’s anger toward her own religion, while not, of course, mandating that she choose another, may suggest that she was open to other possibilities. If she bases her anger on the Muslims’ defeat, a faith based on the Christian victory is not too far-fetched. The ambiguity remains.

conviction” [*“Chrestiene est par veire conoissance”*] (3987). She has changed sides, become a traitor to her religion and her people, but she has done so openly. She does not secretly aid Charles to spite Marsile or her gods; when she makes the ultimate break, she abides by it. Bramimonde, thus, like Aude, offers an alternative to Ganelon’s choices.⁶⁵ Like Aude, he could have rejected his society by removing himself from it; he could have trusted in his God to take care of the problem; or he could have chosen death over disloyalty by perhaps challenging Roland to an outright duel. Like Bramimonde, he could have repeated his declarations of dissatisfaction, making it clear upon his return from the mission to Marsile’s camp that he was still harboring a grudge. Even more tellingly, he could have simply been open about joining the Saracen camp; he, like Bramimonde, could have become a convert. As Kinoshita notes, “In symbolic terms, the convert is the obverse of the traitor” (98). If Ganelon were so unhappy with his nephew and his king, and the Franks whom he was willing to sacrifice to get to Roland, he could simply have declared his break unambiguously and joined the opposing side. Instead, he chose the path of treachery, the role of a traitor, which, as the conversion of Bramimonde makes clear, is the worst role possible. Pagans can be converted; traitors cannot.

Conclusion

If Ganelon is so clearly guilty of many more treasons than he is even accused of, why does the poem still draw scholars to examine the degree and nature of his guilt?

Ironically, it may be the poem’s very insistence on Ganelon’s guilt that invites continual

⁶⁵ These options, death and conversion, are both obviously problematic, particularly in terms of gendered codes of behavior. They are both clearly passive in a way, options taken by those whose sphere of action is limited. But they do, ultimately, seem at least to be clear choices.

speculation and reassessment. Treason in the poem is, in a way, overdetermined, presented as an ontological condition that transcends chronology and drives the narrative. The poem never lets the audience forget that Ganelon is a traitor; by jumping both back and forth in time to present this, the poem gives Ganelon's treasons a strange sense of timelessness. From his first introduction, Ganelon is defined by his treachery: "Ganelon, who committed the act of treachery, came too" [*Guenes i vint, ki la traïsun fist*] (178). Although characterized as an action he "committed" here, treachery will define him throughout the poem. Moreover, the timeline of this action is unclear; it seems to have already happened even though the audience will not learn about it until hundreds of lines later. Treason, the poem suggests, is something Ganelon has always already done.

The muddled timeline of Ganelon's treachery, indicating its perpetuity, is displayed again towards the middle of the poem. During the agonizing scene in which an already dying Roland tries to alert Charles to the lost battle, while Ganelon constantly tries to dissuade Charles from paying attention to it, the poet links the past, present, and future through Ganelon's treachery:

Ganelon rendered him ill service on the day⁶⁶
That he went to sell the members of his household at Saragossa.
Later he lost his life and limbs,
In the trial at Aix, he was sentenced to be hanged,
Along with thirty of his relatives,
Who were not expecting to die.

[*Malvais servis le jur li rendit Guenes
Qu'en Sarraguce sa maisnee alat vendre.
Puis en perdit e sa vie e ses members,*

⁶⁶ Interestingly, Ganelon's betrayal is discussed in feudal terms; he did "ill service" to Charles in particular, not just Roland or the Franks.

*El plait ad Ais en fut juget a pendre,
De ses parenz ensembl'odlui tells trente
Ki de murir nen ourent esperance.] (1406-1411)*

The poet returns us to the time and place of the first betrayal, Ganelon's deal with the Saracens at Saragossa. His actions then and there, promising to place Roland in the rearguard where he could most easily be killed, are the source of Charles's tears in the present of the current scene as he hears the horn and knows it means death for his men. The poet then moves right into a flash forward to Ganelon's punishment for that very deal, giving a brief summary of his fate and that of his household. Such fluidity is both reassuring and unsettling, enacting justice while suggesting that the trespass is unavoidable.

The poem, thus, makes it abundantly clear that Ganelon simply *is* a traitor. It is not just a matter of a convenient tag, although that does help solidify the characterization. The poem needs Ganelon to be a traitor so that Roland and Charles can be the heroes. Vance suggests that the tag of treason is a function of the oral nature of the poem: characters are introduced "with epithets which predetermine and prejudge their identities" (10). While the helpful function of the tag may be true, and practical, I would agree with Pensom's argument that even a "formulaic" tag is not meaningless. He claims, in contrast to Vance, that "the poet conceives of the formulaic item as a context-dependent sign and not simply as a denoter" (83). This is not a random tag, but one that the poem consistently both justifies and requires. Cook considers Ganelon's treachery a narrative imperative: "the story itself requires that Ganelon hate Roland (though not necessarily the converse) and that the traitor find himself in a position to harm the hero through

treachery” (23).⁶⁷ He also sees a textual necessity for Ganelon’s treason in helping construct Roland as epic hero; Ganelon is, he claims, “perhaps the necessary instrument of Roland’s heroism” (66). This kind of equation is not as abstract as it may seem, as Haidu notes: “What makes for a ‘hero,’ what makes for a ‘traitor,’ is the connection of the figures bearing those labels to codes of signification solidly anchored in social codes, of their own time as well as of the reader’s time” (66). Ganelon’s behavior—the quickness with which he believes himself to be insulted, the ease with which he manipulates his role as ambassador, the coolness with which he deceives his emperor and fellow barons about their impending doom—all become even more villainous in light of Roland’s confidence, trustworthiness, and willingness to sacrifice himself for his lord.

Nowhere is this relationship between hero and villain clear than in Roland’s reluctance to believe that his stepfather has actually sold them out. Oliver, watching from a hilltop as the pagan army moves toward them, makes the connection to Ganelon right away: “Ganelon, the villain, the traitor, knew this, / He nominated us before the Emperor [*“Guenes le sout, li fel, li traïtor, / Kin us jugat devan l’empereür”*] (1024-1025). Oliver understands that they have been set up from the start, and has no problem giving Ganelon the names he deserves: “villain,” “traitor.” But Roland rejects the idea: ““Be still, Oliver,’ Count Roland replies, / ‘He’s my stepfather, I don’t want you to breathe another word about him” [*“Tais, Oliver, li quens Rollant respunt, / ‘Mis parrastre est, ne voeill que mot en suns”*”] (1026-1027). Roland cannot stop to think about the repercussions of Oliver’s claim, and he cannot fully make the link between his own stepfather and the

⁶⁷ Pensom also argues that “the *donnees* of the poem cannot be denied: Roland is good, Ganelon is bad” (125).

approaching enemy troops. Only once Turpin has absolved the men before the battle is to begin, and there is no turning back, does Roland finally admit his stepfather's treason. He acknowledges that Oliver "surmised quite correctly / That Ganelon betrayed us all; / He took gold and riches and pieces of silver" [*"mult ben le saviez / Que Guenelun nos ad tuz espies; / Pris en ad or e aveir e deners"*] (1146-1148). Once again, the financial aspect of the betrayal, particularly the phrase "pieces of silver," work to link Ganelon to Judas. Nothing in the poem indicates that Roland has seen these bribes. The figural link stands in for what Roland understands but cannot speak; Oliver can say "traitor," but even here, Roland cannot.

The poem's relentless presentation of Ganelon as a traitor, through repeated tags, contrasts with the heroes, and comparisons to Judas, is compounded by the many scenes in which he actually demonstrates his treachery. Apart from the nomination scene, Ganelon is almost always engaging in treacherous behavior of some sort, making secret deals, lying to his lord and fellow barons, and consorting with infidels. He transgresses legal, cultural, and religious boundaries.⁶⁸ This plethora of proof is both compelling and at times overwhelming. There are, of course, other factors involved in his behavior: Roland pushes his buttons, Charles is sentimental, and Ganelon does take the first step to indemnify himself against the charge of treason. But no one else's actions, even Bramimonde's, come close to Ganelon's in the scope or depth of betrayal. Ganelon remains the ultimate traitor in the literature of the Middle Ages; as Riedel points out,

⁶⁸ Ailes notes that Ganelon is "a man who cannot be trusted and who puts his own petty quarrel above his duty to his lord, his country, and his God" (51).

“most of the poets of the *chansons de geste* are willing to attribute all evil to membership in the tribe of Ganelon” (124).

Yet a close look at Ganelon and his treasons shows just how nuanced the concept was during the Middle Ages. The text refuses to settle on one definition of treason, highlighting the fluidity and ambiguity inherent in medieval ideas about criminal betrayal. This not only allows but invites scholars to investigate the particular circumstances involved in Ganelon’s actions, trial, and execution. A survey of the various definitions of treason reveals that despite numerous differences, the underlying aspect was always a sense of betraying something to which loyalty was owed. For all the variations and legal niceties, there was a reason that treason was seen consistently as the worst of all crimes. Treason produces an anxiety unlike any other crime because it is by definition unexpected, and it can only exist when there is a presumption of trust, whether that trust is between two individuals or an individual and the group to which he or she belongs. The breaking of that trust reveals the vulnerability of all human relationships.

Chapter Two

“What suspicion can do”: Iseut and Betrayal in Bérroul

Even a cursory look at how treason is portrayed in Bérroul's version of *Le Roman de Tristan* reveals some surprises: the story, of the lovers who continue their affair despite the fact that Tristan is the king's trusted nephew and Iseut is the king's wife, generally refuses to focus on their betrayal or consider them as traitors. Instead, the barons who accuse the lovers and help Mark catch them nearly in the act of treason are the villains, and they are the ones characterized as traitors. It seems that everyone is deceiving everyone else in the poem, with varying degrees of success, and this makes a firm definition of treason very difficult to pin down in Bérroul's text. This may explain why, in 1987, A.H. Diverres found it necessary to address what he deemed a major issue in Tristan studies: why Mark sentences the lovers to burn at the stake the first time he catches them. Drawing on the work of J.R. Reinhard, he notes that despite its occurrence in medieval romances, it was not a common punishment for adultery in medieval France (21).¹ Peggy McCracken confirms this in her study of adulterous queens in medieval literature: "death by fire as a punishment for adultery does not seem to have had a long history in the medieval judicial record; its use seems mainly limited to romances" (65).² Reinhard ultimately concludes that the most likely source for the literary trope is the Old

¹ Diverres, A.H. "Tristan and Iseut's Condemnation to the Stake in Beroul." In *Rewards and Punishments in the Arthurian Romances and Lyric Poetry of Mediaeval France: Essays Presented to Kenneth Varty on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*. Eds. Peter V. Davies and Angus J. Kennedy. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987. 21-29.

² See *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

Testament (209).³ Diverres, however, resolves the question by suggesting that scholars have been considering the wrong crime: the lovers are not sentenced for simple adultery, but for treason. This, he argues, explains the punishment: an affair is not just emotional or sexual betrayal when it involves the queen, the mother of any possible heirs, but a matter of treason (26).⁴

Given the somewhat unexpected treatment of treason in Béroul's poem, however, it is easy to see how Reinhard may have missed this point of medieval law. The depiction of treason, and ultimately truth, is extremely nuanced and complex. E. Jane Burns argues that Béroul's text gives "a thorough redefinition of the terms by which truth is established" (*Bodytalk* 208), and Norris J. Lacy explicitly takes her a step further, arguing "that the text radically redefines not merely the *conditions* of truth, but truth itself, which in this work does not mean what we may initially take it to mean" ("Fact and Belief" 3).⁵ Adam Miyashiro agrees, noting that this is accomplished primarily through the character of Iseut, who is constantly "situating truth as a process of 'seeming,' a process by which all language and systems of representation are rendered equally fictional, and hence,

³ Reinhard states that "the sure cases are sure enough: In six places the Old Testament provides the death penalty for those who offend against chastity or marriage; four of those offences are adultery, and three of those are punished with burning" (194). See his "Burning at the Stake in Medieval Law and Literature" in *Speculum* 26.

⁴ Diverres bases his conclusions on English law, which has much clearer legal documents for the relevant time period, since Beroul had "apparent knowledge of the south-west of England" (23).

⁵ Burns considers Béroul's Iseut as a figure of extraordinary power, concluding her study of medieval French women and rhetoric, *Bodytalk*, with a chapter on Iseut. She argues that Iseut's "enormous thighs" create a space in which she can be in charge of the men who would seem to control her (*Bodytalk* 203-240); I have found her work extremely useful. Lacy, in his "Where the Truth Lies: Fact and Belief in Béroul's *Tristran*," also draws on Burns.

equally deceptive" (509-510).⁶ It is difficult to tell who the traitors really are because it is nearly impossible to keep truth and lies, or justice and vengeance, separate. Burning at the stake is not the worst punishment Mark will sanction. In Béroul's text, if deception is the norm, then treason is at once everywhere and yet impossible to define; if rules of law and evidence are ignored, then punishment is not justice but vengeance; and if facts cannot be determined, then suspicion is all that matters. At the center is Iseut.

As the story opens, Iseut, the queen of Cornwall, has met her lover, Tristan, under a tree, presumably for one of their frequent trysts. Although she is the wife of the king, Mark, and Tristan is Mark's nephew and heir, the two lovers are unable to resist the force of the potion that they drank by accident on the voyage that brought Iseut to Cornwall to be married to Mark. Despite the danger and the undeniable disloyalty to their king, husband, and uncle, they continue their affair right under his nose—literally, in the case of the opening scene. As Béroul's poem begins, Iseut has noticed that she and her lover are being observed, and she accordingly shifts the point of their meeting from consummation to the more daunting task of convincing Mark that no such thing is or has been going on. It is an audacious performance that simultaneously accomplishes several feats: she proclaims the lovers' innocence, points out her own particular vulnerabilities, and even absolves Mark of his supposed guilt in believing the charges of adultery by laying the blame at the feet of his villainous barons. Iseut is in complete control of the scene, as Béroul's cue indicates: "Listen how she warned him [Tristan]" [*Oiez com el*

⁶ Miyashiro's excellent and informative article, "Disease and Deceit in Béroul's *Roman de Tristan*," examines the scene of Iseut's oath in terms of the poem's repeated use of leprosy as a theme. See *Neophilologus* 89 (2005): 509-525.

l'a devanci"] (4).⁷ Weeping false tears (8), she begins a long, deceptive speech, spoken to Tristan but intended to convince the eavesdropping Mark that the rumors of their affair are untrue. She tells Tristan that he must stop calling for her (7),⁸ and explains why in a curious mix of equivocal phrasing and outright lies:

Lord Tristran, the king thinks that I have loved you sinfully;
But I affirm my fidelity before God,
And may he punish me
If anyone except the man who took my virginity
Ever had my love.

*[Li rois pense que par folie,
Sire Tristran, vos aie amé;
Mais Dex plevis ma loiauté,
Qui sor mon cors mete flaele,
S'onques fors cil qui m'ot pucele
Out m'amistié encore nul jor!]* (20-25)

Showing an ease with language that will become her hallmark, Iseut undercuts traditional notions of truth and justice; as Miyashiro puts it, she “rewrites the script” (511).

Tellingly, she frames this equivocal speech in terms of an oath before God, claiming that she is ready for God to “punish” her if she is lying about her faithfulness. But the statement that follows is complicated: she tells the truth that only “the man who took my virginity / ever had my love,” but it is not true that this man is Mark.⁹ In fact, this statement is doubly insulting to Mark because not only does it mean that Tristan was her

⁷ All quotations and translations are from *Béroul: The Romance of Tristan*. Ed. and trans. Norris J. Lacy. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989.

⁸ Tristan, as Barbara N. Sargent-Baur points out in her article “Accidental Symmetry: the First and Last Episodes of Béroul’s *Roman de Tristan*,” takes similar advantage of the situation to plead his own case (336).

⁹ Here we must rely on other texts which inform us that it was not Iseut, but her servant Brangain who slept with Mark on the wedding night. See Eilhart pp. 79-80; Gottfried pp. 205-207; *Prose* pp. 93-94.

first sexual partner, but that she does not and never has loved Mark at all.¹⁰ As Lacy explains, she is “speaking equivocally and allowing her husband to believe what he will” (*Tristan* 215-216). It is both true and untrue. At the same time, much of this speech is a simple lie. Of course she has loved Tristan “sinfully;” courtly love may have prescribed adultery, but according to the church, it was still a sin. Within the first twenty-five lines of Bérout’s text, we see an ambiguous relationship between language and meaning, truth and lies; as Lacy puts it, “truth is established as a contingent category” (“Fact and Belief” 4).

This ambiguity, however, is tied to deadly serious and unambiguous consequences. In just the opening scene alone, Iseut mentions that Mark could easily have her buried alive (35), drawn and quartered (65-6), and burned (191-2), all punishments which carried specific connotations for gender, treason, and adultery. Her equivocations are thus a matter of life and death. Moreover, it is not simply the fear of being caught which necessitates the deception; Iseut is wisely afraid of merely being suspected of adultery. She explains to Tristan that: “if the king even suspected it, / I would be drawn and quartered at once” [*‘S’or en savoit li rois un mot, / Mon cors seret desmenbré toi’*] (65-66). Iseut knows full well that her actions would constitute treason—drawing and quartering was the default punishment for treason throughout the Middle Ages (Cutler 116-117).¹¹ Yet as she mentions, all it would take to earn such a

¹⁰ Whether Iseut resumes sleeping with Mark during their periods of reconciliation is not a focal point for Bérout; cf Thomas, in which there are lengthy considerations of what it means (for Tristan) for Iseut to sleep with Mark (see esp. 70-76, 156-176).

¹¹ See his *The Law of Treason and Treason Trials in Later Medieval France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

punishment from Mark is to allow herself to be “suspected” of it. Suspicion and punishment are inextricably linked in the text. Suggesting that the facts are not true is not enough; Iseut has to neutralize the very idea by making it suspect itself.

In an exceedingly clever move, Iseut suggests that while Mark is wrong about his suspicions, he is not to blame for having them in the first place. It is, she says, “the slanderous barons of this land” [“*li felon de cest’enor*”] (26) who “have obviously convinced the king” [“*Li font acroire*”] that the two are lovers (29). The very idea is silly, she claims, and takes the opportunity to clear not just her own name, but Tristran’s as well: “sir, you have no such desire; / nor, in the name of almighty God, do I / have a desire for any love/ that leads to sin and shame” [“*Sire, vos n’en avez talent; / Ne je, par Deu omnipotent, / N’ai corage de drierie / Qui tort a nule vilanie*”] (31-34). There is more equivocating here: of course they may not *want* a love of “sin and shame,” but that is what they have faced ever since drinking the love potion. More importantly, she claims that it is the barons who are at fault, who are manipulating the king into believing what must be lies about his wife and nephew. She gives “honorable” [“*cortois*”] Mark an out (86): “He would never, of his own accord, have suspected / that we might share such a thought” [“*Ja nu pensast nul mor par lui / Q’en cest pensé fuson andui*”] (87-88). The barons, she suggests, have perverted their roles and “misled” [“*desveier*”] Mark (89), who has been “made to do wrong and abandon good” [“*Faire le mal et bien laisier*”] (90). Mark leaves convinced that the lovers are innocent.

But Mark is wrong. The brief analysis of the opening scene reveals the main issues which work to complicate the presentation of treason in Bérout’s poem. The

traitorous affair between the lovers is only one aspect to investigate. Legal procedure, royal justice, truth, and gender codes are all subject to (mis)interpretation within the poem. Drawing on legal texts from the Middle Ages, such as Beaumanoir's *Coutumes*,¹² on the work of modern scholars of medieval law like R. Howard Bloch and Richard Firth Green, and on feminist scholars E. Jane Burns, Peggy McCracken, and Karma Lochrie,¹³ my discussion of Bérout's *The Romance of Tristan* focuses on the ways in which treason is portrayed within a world in which almost nothing can be trusted. As Diverres asks, "Whose treachery is the greatest?" (29). The poem makes it nearly impossible to decide; what may be more fruitful is to examine how the characters navigate the charges. The lovers betray their king but are the heroes. The barons are truthful, but spiteful and cowardly; their characterization as traitors stems in part from the way other knights consider them feminized, betraying appropriate gendered behavior. Mark is clearly the wronged party, the cuckolded husband, but is tainted by his own betrayal of standard justice; he prohibits Tristan from exercising his masculine and knightly privilege to defend himself in battle and then subjects a helpless Iseut to a gendered and sexually-coded punishment from which she only narrowly escapes. Throughout the text, and particularly at the end, Iseut's equivocations work both to take advantage of and resist

¹² *The Coutumes de Beauvaisis of Phillippe de Beaumanoir*. Trans. and ed. F.R.P. Akehurst. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992. All quotations and translations are from this edition.

¹³ I am drawing on Bloch primarily for his discussion of legal terms; as will become clear, I differ from him in not ascribing the moment of greatest legal dilemma in the poem to the scene in the forest; see *Medieval French Literature and Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. Richard Firth Green's work focuses on English law, but he does discuss both Iseut and the nature of equivocal oaths. See *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Karma Lochrie's study of women and secrecy in the Middle Ages provides an interesting way of reading the power negotiations between the barons, Iseut, and Mark. See her *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

misogynist stereotypes and legal loopholes, consistently evading the charge of treason of which she is guilty.

Béroul's Text

There is a long and fairly complex history of the Tristan story in the Middle Ages, with several extant versions in various forms of completion.¹⁴ As Joan Tasker Grimbert explains, “At the core of the legend as it evolved in the Middle Ages is a passionate love that is both fated and fatal, a mutual ardor so strong and exclusive as to override the most compelling family, social, and religious taboos” (xvi). Béroul’s late twelfth century text differs from the other in several ways. For one thing, it is striking in its tone. While the lovers, particularly Tristran, are always portrayed as the heroes of the tale, there is an energy in his support of the lovers that some of the other texts lack. Grimbert remarks on the “upbeat tone” of Béroul’s poem (xxi), and Curtis argues that “Béroul’s text gives one the impression that it was written by someone with a positive outlook” (34). The writing is vibrant; as Alberto Varvaro notes in his study of the poem, “for him [Béroul] ‘narration’ means ‘immediate communication,’ emotional co-participation of narrator and audience in the uncertain vicissitudes of the protagonists” (50).¹⁵ Béroul makes no secret of his unwavering support for both Tristran and Iseut, and often suggests that God shares

¹⁴ For a concise but thorough explanation of the versions, see the “Introduction” to Renee L. Curtis’s edition of the *Prose Tristan*; see also Joan Tasker Grimbert’s wide-ranging “Introduction” to *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*.

¹⁵ See his *Béroul’s Romance of Tristran*. Trans. John C. Barnes. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972.

his feelings; this is despite, as Lacy notes, the fact that the lovers “are, apparently, habitual liars and unrepentant sinners” (“Fact and Belief” 1).¹⁶

For the purposes of my discussion, though, the most interesting aspect of Bérout’s version is its focus on Iseut.¹⁷ This is primarily a result of the fragmentary nature of the manuscript.¹⁸ We start in medias res—after the story of Tristan’s birth and youth, after he has established himself as the hero of Cornwall and his uncle’s designated heir, and after he had brought Iseut back from Ireland to be his uncle’s wife. It is also after the lovers have accidentally taken the fateful potion, intended for Iseut and her husband-to-be, and fallen in love—love so passionate that they will die if they are not able to keep consummating it.¹⁹ As even this brief summary shows, much of the focus in these early

¹⁶ The extent to which God does or does not support the lovers is a matter of great interest to a great many Tristan scholars; J.M. Anderson notes in “Romantic Love as Natural Right in Bérout’s *Romance of Tristan*” that “At every turn in the poem Bérout hints that the Christian God supports Tristan and Iseut, recognizes their innocence (despite their adultery and impiety), and will destroy their enemies” (50-51). Varvaro has a difficult time explaining God’s seeming tolerance of the adultery: “for him [Bérout] the offence against moral law, of which the lovers are undeniably guilty, certainly does not determine their position in the eyes of God [...] And this can be explained only by admitting that the lovers are guilty on account of their adultery but never seem to have offended God in person” (80). The question takes on greater importance in Gottfried’s version, in which he makes the eyebrow-raising remark that Christ must be “pliant as a windblown sleeve. He falls in to place and clings, whichever way you try Him” (248) to allow Iseut’s ordeal to prove her innocent. I am, however, less concerned here with the religious consequences of their affair than with the earthly repercussions.

¹⁷ The other versions I have consulted include the Thomas of Britain’s *Tristan*. Ed. and Trans. Stewart Gregory. New York: Garland, 1991; Eilhart von Oberg’s *Tristrant*. Trans. J. W. Thomas. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978; Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Great Britain: R. & R. Clark Ltd, 1960; and *The Romance of Tristan: The Thirteenth-century Old French ‘Prose Tristan.’* Trans. and ed. Renée L. Curtis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹⁸ Merritt R. Blakeslee notes that “in all but two of the poems [Bérout and the *Tros*] Tristan is the focus of the narrative” (97); typically “Iseut does not adopt the range of identities assumed by Tristan, whose kaleidoscopic changes of form and identity are at once a major theme of the poems and a powerful tool of metaphorical development and of literary invention and variation [...] She is the constant against which the variables of the narrative are set in motion” (5).

¹⁹ Therefore I am leaving out plenty of interesting details and debates about the Tristan story, including the nature of the potion and the nature of their love. Bérout does, of course, refer to the potion throughout the poem. It provides an excuse for the illicit love; as Renee L. Curtis argues, “The second function of the

episodes is on Tristan and his adventures; starting after them leaves us with a fragment that is more balanced between both lovers than most texts.²⁰ The end of the tale is missing, too, in which most narratives follow Tristan through more adventures and his marriage to another Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands.²¹ To be fair, the fragmentary nature of Bérout's text means that we also lose the early history of Iseut, who shows remarkable skill and intellect in some versions in literally piecing together the clues to figure out that it is Tristan who has slain both her uncle and a terrifying dragon.²² When the texts do cover the love affair between the two, though, the depiction of Iseut follows a basic pattern; McCracken points out that "the portrayal of the adulterous queen and her position in the hierarchy of power and in the symbolic structure of the romance feudal court remain remarkably stable. Iseut is vulnerable to accusation and adept at

philter is to overturn completely the scale of values Tristan had adhered to previously. Much as he had desired Iseut, he had been swayed in his decision by social obligations, both his duty to his uncle, and his fear of being "*renomez a deal*". Then he drinks the potion" (*Tristan Studies* 21). However, as all this happens before Bérout's fragment begins, and, more importantly, as it is never made public knowledge and thus is never offered as a mitigating factor to Mark or the barons, it is not a major focus of my discussion. For a convincing argument that Tristan, at least, experienced "pre-philtral love," see Curtis, *Tristan Studies*, especially p. 20.

²⁰One of the key stories we miss that deals with Iseut, however, is her cold-blooded attempt to have her loyal lady Brangane murdered. In Gottfried's version, we see a paranoid, insecure, conniving Iseut who plots the death of her best friend and second most-trusted companion after Brangane has nobly sacrificed her body and virginity to Mark on the wedding night (208-211); the story is recounted in Thomas (ll. 1283-1311) and the *Prose* version (96-100). This history of treachery on Iseut's part is only hinted at in Bérout's version. Without this scene, the craftiness of Bérout's Iseut maintains a different valence.

²¹ Blakeslee points out that this "failure to keep faith with Iseut" is part of his overall character in the other Tristan poems, in which the focus is largely on *Tristan's* ability to deceive, not Iseut's (13).

²² For more on Iseut's intelligence and skill, see Leslie W. Rabine's "Love and the New Patriarchy: Tristan and Isolde" in *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. Ed. Joan Tasker Grimbert. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995. 37-74. She links this to the greater legal freedom and power that early Irish law allowed women (50-57).

dissimulation in all the stories” (17). Béroul’s fragment leaves us with the heart of the narrative, much of which focuses on Iseut as she weaves herself into and out of danger.

“treachery without murder”

Part of the difficulty in discussing treason in the text stems from the fact that the types of treason with which we are dealing in *Tristan and Iseut* are a far cry from those which we saw in *Roland*. Béroul’s text does not feature treason against the king in terms of plotting his death or aiding his enemies. In fact, many critics point out that Tristran and Iseut bear Mark relatively little ill will.²³ There is, however, the matter of their treasonous adultery. Much of what we know about treason during this time comes from Beaumanoir.²⁴ His *Coutumes*, finished in 1283, is very culturally and temporally specific, so we cannot of course assume that customs would have been the exact same during earlier periods.²⁵ But there are a few things in Beaumanoir that bear on the portrayal of treason as Béroul (and, more generally, the Tristan tradition) has it. The most typical charges of treason, as mentioned, do not apply in the story we have here. However, Beaumanoir frequently broadens the definition of “traitor” to mean someone who deceives people whose trust he or she has gained. The status of the deceived person does not always seem to matter. Beaumanoir states that “there may be treachery without

²³ Varvaro is an exception: “any search for verses attesting concern in the lovers for Marc’s feelings will be fruitless” (87).

²⁴ Marc Bloch warns in *Feudal Society* that “it is often necessary to make cautious use of relatively late works to understand a social structure which was never adequately described before the thirteenth century and which, in many of its features, survived into the Europe of the great monarchies” (119). I am clearly following his lead in using Beaumanoir.

²⁵ Akehurst reminds us that Beaumanoir’s text gives us “not the common law of France, but the customs of a small region” (xiii).

murder in many cases; for murder doesn't occur without a person's death, but treachery appears in beating or injuring someone during a truce or a guaranteed peace or in an ambush, or in giving false witness in order that someone will be put to death, or disinherited, or to have him banished or to have him hated by his liege lord, or in many other similar cases" (§827, p. 303).²⁶ So treachery can happen whenever there is the expectation of peace; it is always hidden and therefore always a surprise. This concealed violation of trust seems to be the heart of betrayal, as far as Beaumanoir is concerned; this remains the basic element of treason charges throughout medieval France.²⁷ As F.R.P. Akehurst, Beaumanoir's modern editor, points out, "Treachery, for Beaumanoir, is an action done by stealth" (334, note 3). Thus, Beaumanoir himself argues that there is "little difference between fraud and treachery" (§992, p.352).²⁸ Deception seems to be the key to determining whether an act falls within the realm of treason. The lovers are deceiving Mark, even though they owe him complete loyalty—Iseut her sexual faithfulness, Tristran his familial faithfulness, and both their feudal loyalty.²⁹

²⁶ In terms of Béroul's text, the last part of this definition may shed some light on the treatment of the Cornish barons. If it is treason to bear "false witness" so that a person is "banished" or "hated by his liege lord," then the barons are in a tough position. They are not, of course, bearing "false witness;" the text makes it clear that they have seen the two themselves. But in terms of the story, at several key points Mark thinks that he knows for a fact that the lovers are not having an affair, and so believes the barons to be lying—and that would be treachery.

²⁷ Indeed, even as definitions of treason became increasingly king-centered during the Middle Ages in France, "Most treasons involved a breach of loyalty" (Cutler 37).

²⁸ Beaumanoir often describes as "traitors" those who are not planning *lèse-majesté*, treason against the king or country, but those who are simply being sneaky: a conscious perjurer, for example, acts as "a traitor" for lying actively (§1207, p.436).

²⁹ Women (in England) could take oaths of fealty, though not homage (Glanville 103).

Their affair is thus the main problem. Adultery in the Middle Ages is a notoriously thorny issue, complicated by shifts in marriage practices, the literary theory of courtly love, and the clear and familiar double standard in the attitude toward male and female transgressions. Although kings themselves were never charged with treason for adultery, this does not mean that no men ever were. As John F. Benton has argued, “One form of adultery was considered iniquitous beyond all the rest, and that was the crime of a vassal who betrayed his lord. Adultery with the lord’s wife was a form of treason” (26).³⁰ Adultery does not have to involve royalty for it to constitute treason, however, as Beaumanoir explains in a sample case; in fact, as the judgment makes clear, the hierarchical position of the men does not have to factor into a charge of treason at all. Beaumanoir lays out the case brought by a lord against one of his men who “had treacherously seduced his wife, and had lain with her like a traitor” (§1772, p.645). The reiteration of “treacherously” and “traitor” points to how serious the plaintiff (the lord) considers the crime. The defendant, however, tries to save himself by arguing that there was no treason involved at all—a wise decision, given the severe penalties for treason (§1772, p.645). Yet Beaumanoir sides with the plaintiff, and considers the act treason:

And we make a decision by saying in our opinion that if the appellant had complained only that the faith in the homage had been broken by doing so shameful a thing as seducing his wife, then there would be a wager; and *if there had been no question of homage and he had given him his wife and his land into his safekeeping and the appellee had made such a poor job of the safekeeping, then he could have been accused of treachery [traison]*” (§1773, p.645, my italics).

³⁰ He points to widespread laws on this, in medieval Barcelona law, and in Philip the Fair’s of France’s punishment of two of his sons’ wives for adultery (27). See his “Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love.”

The key here seems to be that there was an expectation of trust and safety between the two men in terms of the wife: the defendant was expected to keep the wife safe from any harm—including himself. Beaumanoir clearly states that even “if there had been no question of homage,” such an act would be considered treason. This kind of case clearly reflects the position of Tristran, Mark, and Iseut. Tristran is not just Mark’s nephew and heir, but the strongest knight in Cornwall; he is their protector, having fought the Irish giant Morholt. Moreover, Mark expects Tristran to keep Iseut safe, not keep her for himself. It is this kind of trust and expectation that, when broken, is the basis for treason. As Akehurst points out, “the meaning of breaker of a solemn promise (such as to safeguard a person or a kingdom placed in one’s care) was also current for *traison* in Beaumanoir’s time” (n. 19, 650). Tristran is every bit as guilty as Iseut is.

“*pour fere folie de leur cors*”: Women and Adultery

Adultery was a far more complicated issue when it came to women. Women who were accused of adultery faced a much tougher time than men; at the same time, the idea of courtly love gained ground in the twelfth century and seemed to promote adulterous love as the most sublime kind. Despite early nineteenth- and twentieth-century arguments that courtly love endorsed not just adultery but increased power for women, through their status as desired object, courtly love is largely recognized now as a literary phenomenon that did little to improve the lives of actual women.³¹ It is true, as J.M.

³¹ The standard medieval text is *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus; for a sample early argument that courtly love signaled a rise in the status of women, see C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*. For an overview of this debate, see Rabine, especially page 39; see also Andrée Kahn Blumstein, who argues in *Misogyny and Idealization in the Courtly Romance* that courtly love is “a nineteenth century fiction” (1), subject now to “use and abuse” (2). Chivalry, for him, “is but one more method by which what has been called the ‘great patriarchal conspiracy’ is perpetrated and perpetuated in our culture” (2).

Anderson points out in a more recent article, that increasing church involvement in marriage in the twelfth century, primarily in terms of making it a sacrament and encouraging the consent of the bride herself contributed to giving women some power (44). This, he says, was concurrent with the way that “compassion for women was one of chivalry’s civilizing effects” (45).³² However, while the church’s involvement did greatly affect marriage practices, most scholars contend that this did little to improve daily life for most women. Georges Duby argues, in fact, that the increased status of the marriage bond worked to solidify the role of the husband/father to the detriment of the wife/mother (18).³³ Moreover, any long lasting “compassion” from courtly love is questionable. Benton, for example, notes that “Since they did not encourage a genuine respect for women as individuals, the conventions of medieval chivalry, like the conventions of chivalry in the southern United States, did not advance women toward legal or social emancipation. When men ignored chivalry, women were better off. Who would trade the position of Njal’s wife for that of Isolt?” (35). Ultimately, while it is undeniable that works such as Andreas’s treatise did in fact sanction adulterous love, they did not do so with the effect of exonerating women who were actually accused of adultery, nor did they

³² Anderson is concerned with the role of romantic love in Béroul’s poem; he argues that Béroul equates romantic love with natural rights accorded to humans during the twelfth-century renaissance. This may explain his willingness to overlook the darker aspects of chivalry.

³³ Duby takes much more interest in what was really happening to real women during the early Middle Ages in France. “Through marriage, societies try to maintain and perpetuate their own structures, seen in terms of a set of symbols and of the image they have of their own ideal perfection. The rites of marriage are instituted to ensure an orderly distribution of the women among the men; to regulate competition between males for females; to ‘officialize’ and socialize procreation. By designating a father, marriage adds another form of affiliation to the only self-evident one, through the mother” (Duby 18). See *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*. Trans. Barbara Bray. Intro. Natalie Zemon Davis. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

provide more than a temporary and contingent space for women to exert power.³⁴ As Leslie Rabine puts it, “In courtly love a metaphorical power replaces real social status, while the high position of the single great lady compensates for the lowered position of women as a social group” (43).

Moreover, courtly love relied on adultery, and adultery was risky for women. D.W. Robertson, in his article “The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts,” points out that adulterous love was “dangerous, since adultery on the part of a wife in medieval society...was not taken lightly by law and custom” (1). Beaumanoir notes several times that any woman who chooses to engage in it must be willing to suffer the consequences (594).³⁵ The situation is duly exacerbated when the woman in question is a queen. It is the queen’s job to keep the royal bloodline pure; “the queen’s responsibility to produce a royal heir was always her most important role medieval monarchies” (McCracken 6). As Duby points out, even a bastard inheriting an ordinary estate was a horrifying prospect.³⁶ The English treatise writer Glanville is very clear on this point: “no-one who is a bastard or not born of a lawful

³⁴ Since the first part of Andreas’s treaty famously encourages the rape of lower-class women, it is a tenuous argument at best. He tells his audience “when you find a convenient place, do not hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace them by force” (I.xi, p.150).

³⁵ Beaumanoir, unfortunately, does not deal directly with the case of queens who commit adultery. But he does note that in general cases where “a woman leaves her husband without the husband’s fault, -- such as when some wives go off to commit adultery [*pour fere folie de leur cors*]...she should be reprehended for leaving her husband so foolishly and for so little reason, and she should be ordered back to her husband; and if she will not go, and she is poor or in need, it serves her right; and she should get little pity” (§1628, p. 594).

³⁶ Duby notes: “The danger was great. The worst danger of all was that a wife might be made pregnant by a man other than her husband, and children of a blood different from that of the master of the house might one day bear the name of his ancestors and succeed to their inheritance” (47).

marriage may be a lawful heir” (87). As property and inheritance laws became more focused on keeping lands and estates centered on the eldest male heir, the need to ensure that the male in question truly belonged to the father’s line became even more pressing. Duby argues that this explains why few adulterous queens in medieval literature ever end up pregnant: “But adultery, though consummated, was barren. Bastardy was too serious a matter to be treated lightly even in literature. People were too afraid of it to use it as a subject for a tale” (222). McCracken confirms this: “In almost all twelfth- and thirteenth-century medieval French romances, adulterous queens are barren” (26). Iseut and Guinevere are perhaps the most famous. This, in fact, may be one area in which medieval women had a terrifying (to their husbands) power: only the mother had complete control and knowledge of just how and by whom her child was conceived, but, as McCracken notes that “The queen’s child is born into the royal family, whether or not her husband is the father” (18). Adultery on the part of the queen truly was a matter of state, compounding the simple marital betrayal with the threat of unseating the rightful male heir to the throne; a queen’s adultery was automatically treason.

Thus, even the hint of adultery was dangerous, especially for a royal woman. Nancy Black points out that “it would seem that slander, for royal women, was something of an occupational hazard and that the more powerful the noblewoman, the more likely she was to face accusations of adultery or treason” (68).³⁷ Eleanor of Aquitaine is

³⁷ See *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

perhaps the most famous queen to have faced such accusations,³⁸ but no one was above suspicion, as Duby explains:

It was so easy to make accusations. People lived at close quarters to each other in noble households; gossip was rife; there were always jealous observers prepared to say they had seen or heard something amiss. How could any man, even a bishop, fail to give credence to them, knowing as he did how consuming female ardor was? Had not

the holy emperor Henry momentarily believed in the guilt of the no less holy Cunegonde, forcing her to submit to the ordeal by fire? (73-4).³⁹

Duby's observation that "gossip was rife" in medieval households, including kings' castles, underscores the way in which mere suspicion plays a key role in adultery and treason accusations. Karma Lochrie, in her work on women and secrecy in *Covert Operations*, argues that "one of the tricks of secrecy is to call our attention to the supposed secrets as the locus of truth, rather than all operations that make them appear to be truths and the social relationships that are negotiated through them" (4). She examines how secrecy is a pleasure in itself, regardless of what the secret is actually about (41).⁴⁰ Her work is thus useful as it elucidates Iseut's primary concern throughout Béroul's text: not that Mark will discover the truth about the secret affair, but that Mark will act on mere suspicion that there is a secret at all. Treason, in fact, cannot exist without secrecy—as discussed in the previous chapter, truly open hostility is not treason at all. Treason was, thus, even more complex than the double dealings shown in *Roland*. It

³⁸ For more on Eleanor, see McCracken (1).

³⁹ For more on Cunegonde, see Duby (57-8); McCracken (11); see also John W. Baldwin's "The Crisis of the Ordeal: literature, law, and religion around 1200" (345-346).

⁴⁰ This is in response to Michel Foucault's famous focus on sex in the history of confession (41).

could involve any breach of trust, but when that breach cast doubt on the family line, it was an even more devastating matter. As Duby points out, in the twelfth century “female adultery was not just a fearful figment of husbands’ imaginations but a feature of high society” (197).⁴¹ It had real consequences, not only for those who actually were accused, but for anyone in a position to be accused—for anyone who could fall victim to fears of secrecy and suspicion.

“the traitors of the king”: The Barons

Ironically, the main traitors in the text are not Tristan and Iseut, the adulterous pair, but the barons who continually seek to expose them. Bérout’s text defines treachery and identifies traitors in somewhat unexpected ways, privileging not actual betrayal or deception, but an unexplained, inherent villainy and pettiness as the main qualifications. Iseut, for example, tells Brangain that whoever sent Mark to eavesdrop on them in the opening scene “tried to betray us today” [*“nos vout traïr”*] (348). Tristran, too, considers them “traitors” [*“fel covert”*] (121). For both of them, those who would reveal the adulterous love are traitors, not the lovers themselves. The barons, thus, are key figures for a discussion of treason in the text. They are, as Bérout makes clear, the villains of the poem, jealous of Tristran and out to get Iseut. Varvaro points out that “It is rare for Bérout to speak of the barons without breaking off for a moment to utter a violent malediction against them” (61). Interestingly, there is no sexual threat coming from

⁴¹ There is also the case of Fouque Nerra, who supposedly burned his wife Elizabeth for her adultery (Duby 91; Benton 26). Reinhard, however, notes that it is “hard to ascertain” exactly what happened with Elizabeth, given that there was also a fire “which consumed the city” (197). He does note, though “the deed with which he is charged would easily be imputed to a man who enjoyed a similar reputation for violence and brutality” (197).

them; they want to control her sexuality, keep it in line, but they do not seem to want her themselves.⁴² That, of course, would put them in the treacherous situation in which Tristran finds himself. They are condemned for giving bad advice, a cardinal sin for barons in the feudal age. Yet they do nothing but tell the truth, having witnessed the crime themselves, and try to help Mark regain his honor. In another story, they might be the heroes, or the wise counselors, the Oliver. But instead, they are the Ganelons—one, in fact, actually is named Ganelon.⁴³

It is not only Tristran and Iseut who see the barons as traitors. Bérout stacks the deck against the barons by showing that the people of Cornwall also view their actions as treachery. Even when the lovers are caught, and Mark sentences them to be burned at the stake, the people are not angry at the lovers, but at the barons: “What a pity that these villains / treacherously trapped you! [*“Qel damage qu’en traïson / Vos ont fait prendre cil gloton!”*] (835-836). The people clearly do not believe the adultery charge, and why should they? The people love Tristran, with whom their primary loyalty seems to lie. They love him because he saved them from the Morholt, the Irish giant who had been demanding tributes of Cornwall’s children, when none of their own barons—or their king—would (848-859). The sense of mutual obligation that they ought to have with Mark they have with Tristran instead: “He wounded you with a lance, / sir, and you

⁴² McCracken uses the work of Christiane Marchello-Nizia to argue that “Just as the possession of the queen substitutes for the possession of the king’s power, the possession of knowledge about the queen’s adultery can be seen to substitute for the possession of the queen” (86). However, it never appears that the barons want Iseut; they seem far more concerned with using her as a way to get rid of Tristran.

⁴³ The three barons are not named until 3138-39; they have no individualized personalities, nor any function other than to thwart the lovers.

nearly died from it. / We should not allow you / to be put to death now” [*“Il vos navra d’un javelot, / Sire, dont tu deüs morir. / Ja ne devrion consentir / Que vostre cors fust ce destruit”*] (856-59). The phrasing is suggestive there; I will return to this point, but it is important to note that the people see this as an execution, not a just sentence. At the burning, the people of Cornwall “screamed, cried, / and cursed the traitors of the king” [*“trestuit braient et tuit criënt, / Les traitors le roi maudient”*] (1143-44). Treason, thus, is in the eye of the beholder here. Stephen D. White explains this circuitous logic: “treason can be identified, not as an act at all, but as the defining trait of the ‘traitor’—an intrinsically disloyal person” (107).⁴⁴ The barons are actually being loyal to Mark here, though it does not appear this way to the people, who refuse to believe that their hero could commit the betrayal he does but are more than willing to ascribe treachery to the petty, jealous barons.

The conflation of treachery with disagreeability is magnified by the hatred which Arthur’s knights show for the barons. The paragons of chivalry, Arthur’s knights detest barons who will not fight their battles with weapons, but choose gossip and manipulation instead. When Perinis goes to Logres towards the end of the fragment to ask for Arthur’s presence at the exculpatory oath Iseut must give, Bérroul makes it clear that Arthur’s people are entirely sympathetic with Iseut: “God! What do they want from her?” [*“Dex!’ fait chascun, ‘que li demandent?’”*] (3451). Informed that Tristan’s offer to prove their

⁴⁴ See his “The Problem of Treason: the Trial of Daire le Roux.” *Law, Laity and Solidarities: Essays in Honour of Susan Reynolds*. Eds. Pauline Stafford, Janet L. Nelson and Jane Martindale. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. 95-115.

innocence in combat has gone nowhere because no one is willing to fight him,⁴⁵ and this is why Iseut must take the oath (3419-25), Arthur's knights are disdainful. Gawain swears that "the three traitors" [*trois felons*] will regret bringing Iseut to trial (3461), and informs the court that "The worst of them is Ganelon; / I know him well, and he knows me" [*Li plus coverz est Guenelons: / Gel connois bien, si fait il moi*] (3462-63). Ganelon, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is a loaded name, shorthand for treachery, villainy, and vassals who are confused about their duties and loyalties. Yvain also equates the three barons' villainy with treachery: "Traitors deserve to be punished. / Those hypocrites are deceiving the king" [*Molt doit on felon chastier. / Du roi joint si losengier*] (3493-3494).⁴⁶ Girflet, moreover, explains that the three "have bitterly hated the queen" [*molt par heent la roïne*] (3474); the trial, clearly, is being viewed as a matter of private revenge. Perinis leaves Logres confident "that the traitors who caused trouble / for the queen will be punished for it" [*Que li felon prendront colee, / Qui la roïne ont quis meslee*] (3497-3498).

Given the view that Arthur's knights have of them, it seems that one way in which Bérout adds to the portrait of the barons as "traitors" is by depicting them as feminized. The traits that disgust both the people and the other knights are those often associated with women during the Middle Ages: the barons lie, gossip, let their emotions control their actions, and maneuver their way into power by complaining loudly. They repeatedly

⁴⁵ "No one wanted to dispute that fidelity / by taking up arms. / But now, sire, they have convinced Mark/ that she must take an oath" [*Ainz nus de tele loiauté / Ne vout armes saisir ne prendre. / Sire, or font le roi Marc entendre / Que il prenge de lié deraisne*] (3422-3425).

⁴⁶ The fact that Yvain says that the barons "are deceiving" Mark indicates that they do not believe the charges. But there are clearly other issues that play into the characterization of the barons as traitors.

refuse to engage in physical combat. Karma Lochrie's discussion of gossip can be used to help explain both how the barons are able to exploit their hatred of the lovers, and what the consequences of that exploitation are: "Gossip establishes boundaries of outside and inside, public and private, and it draws distinctions between insiders and others. As such, it performs a crucial cultural function of constructing social identity and exclusion..." (62). The barons' willingness to gossip about Tristan and Iseut's affair, speaking to Mark instead of confronting the lovers themselves, ultimately seems to fix their own identities as traitors rather than Tristan and Iseut's. As Lochrie argues, gossip is "nearly always identified with anti-social behavior, excluded groups of people, and a diminished form of social expression" (62). The barons are definitely painted in the text as "anti-social;" no one else in Cornwall, or in Britain, for that matter, wants to deal with the barons or hear about the affair. They have no one on their side other than Mark, and his support is fleeting and ultimately withdrawn. Their attempt to use gossip to persuade Mark, or anyone, of the queen's guilt fails spectacularly.

Yet what is most striking about the treatment of the barons is that Bérout states clearly that they are telling the truth. It is not simply that the barons claim to have seen the lovers in the act—Bérout narrates it as a fact that they have:

For the other day they had seen the fair Iseut
with Tristan, in a garden, under a grafted tree,
in a situation
that no one should tolerate.
And several times they had seen them
lying completely naked in King Mark's bed.

*[Qar, en un gardin, soz une ente,
Virent la'autrier Yseut la gente
Ovoc Tristan en tel endroit*

*Que nus hon consenter ne doit;
Et plusors foiz les ont veüz
El lit roi Marc gesire toz nus.] (589-594)*

They have irrefutable visual proof of the affair, of treason.⁴⁷ They cannot, thus, understand why Mark refuses to believe them: “It is obvious to anyone who cares to look, / and we will no longer tolerate it” [*Savoir le puet qui c’onques veut / Et nos nu volon mais sofrir*] (608-609). It is the shameless publicity of it that bothers them. The barons think that Mark simply does not want to see it. They also do not like how it reflects on kingship; they tell Mark that they are angry “because we know for a fact / that you are fully aware of their crime / and that you condone it” [*Qar bien savon de verité / Que tu consenz lor cruauté, / Et tu sez bien ceste merveille*] (615-617). A king who refuses to deal with blatant treason is a weak king indeed. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the country: “whatever he may think of us, / we want him to banish his nephew” [*Ou il nos aint ou il nos hast, / Nos volon son nevo en chast*] (601-602).⁴⁸ If he refuses, they warn him that “you will never have our allegiance, / and we will never leave you in peace” [*Ne nos tenron a vos jamez, / Si ne vos tendron nule pez*] (621-622). This is a clear threat. Marc Bloch points out that “even among the sovereigns whose power is most vaunted by the chroniclers, it would be impossible to find one who did not have to spend long years in suppressing rebellions” (409). Thus, as R.H. Bloch

⁴⁷ Beaumanoir notes that two honest witnesses whose stories agree constitute sufficient proof (§1149, p. 419).

⁴⁸ As Varvaro explains, “The lovers’ adultery certainly offends only Marc’s honour but if he fails to avenge it he neglects his legal duty and therefore sullies himself in his turn with a very serious failing in that he mars his regal perfection and holds up his unworthiness for all to see. It is this and not directly Yesut’s adultery which infringes the rights of both vassals and humble plebeians, and in fact what the barons directly demand is not punishment of the lovers’ crime but only that Tristran’s banishment shall render the crime impossible, removing any suspicion that Marc knows of it without punishing the offender, thus making himself unworthy” (108).

notes, “The barons of Tintagel had the right to declare war upon Marc for not following their advice in the drive to oust Tristan” (242). Their plight is pitiable, in a way. They know without a doubt what is going on, and repeatedly say that they cannot “tolerate” it. The steps they take to end the affair only seem like “justice” [*justise*] to them (776).

However, their motives are not entirely impersonal, nor entirely to do with Mark as king. McCracken argues that “the queen’s adultery is the pretext that the barons use to avoid direct conflict with the king’s nephew” (100). Bérout constantly cites their fear and jealousy of Tristan. When they “angrily seized Tristan in his bed” [*Tristran par ire a son lit prenent*] (772), it is not simply to catch the man who is sleeping with the queen, but because “They detested him / for his great prowess, and because of the queen” [*Cuelli l’orent cil en haïne, / Por so prooise, et la roïne*] (773-774). Iseut seems to be a secondary reason here; the primary reason for their hate seems to be a jealous fear. But Iseut is an easier victim. There is a bit of sadism in their treatment of Iseut, as well. It is the barons who demand that Iseut be bound to the stake at her impromptu burning (1097-1098). After Mark and Iseut have reconciled, when Tristan has been banished and Iseut restored to the king’s side (2620-25), the “traitors” [*traïtor*] (3033) start in on Iseut again (3028). The barons tell Mark that “The queen has never proven by oath / whether she was unfaithful to you, / and people condemn you for that” [*Se la roïne a esté fole, / El n’en fist onques escondit. / S’a vilainie vos est dit*] (3042-3044). But there is no mention anywhere else in the text that the “people condemn” Mark for anything other than his vicious treatment of the lovers. Inverting Iseut’s more successful approach, they lie in their attempt to bring the truth to light. Lacy, only half kidding, argues that the only

“reliable guide to truth” in the text, in fact, is that “it can be understood to be the opposite of whatever the lovers’ enemies, the *felons*, say” (“Fact and Belief” 6).

The barons seem stuck in the past; Mark is content to accept Iseut in the present, confident that a banished Tristran ensures an end to the affair. Yet they persist:

The barons of your land
have repeatedly asked you
to have her clear herself of the charge
that she took Tristran as her lover.
She must prove that people were lying.
Have her undergo a trial
and demand it immediately,
in private, when you go to bed.

*[Et li baron de ton païs
T'en ont par mainte foiz requis,
Qu'il vuelent bien s'en escondie
Que o Tristran n'ot sa driërie.
Escondire se doit c'on ment.
Si l'en fait faire jugement
Et envoieis l'en require,
Priveement, a ton couchier.]* (3045-3052)

They resort again to gossip, to claims that “the barons” want to know the truth about rumors without offering more specifics. Part of the subversive power of gossip comes from its “rootlessness,” as Lochrie puts it: something which has no source cannot be completely contradicted, eradicated (63). As we see in Bérout’s text, it is the tool on which the barons rely when their other attempts prove useless. Accusing someone of treason was a serious undertaking in the Middle Ages. As Beaumanoir states, anyone defaming another as “wicked or a traitor” must prove it or risk having the charge turned around against him or herself (306). The barons are thus playing a dangerous game. Moreover, the directions that they give Mark are suggestive. While it is true that Mark’s

“bed” is the scene of the crime, and thus perhaps an especially appropriate place to make such a demand, it is also the site of the king and queen’s most intimate moments. This is one of the few times that the barons seem concerned with Iseut’s sexuality outside of her relationship with Tristan, adding a degree of prurience. When Mark resists, threatening them with Tristan (3078-3079) and suggesting that they should have fought him themselves when they had the chance (3128-3129), the barons plead once again that they are simply doing their job: “Men have an obligation to advise their lord, / but you are offended when we do so” [*L’en devroit par droit son seignor / Conseillier: tu nos sez mal gré*] (3112-3113).⁴⁹ The problem seems to lie in the method of their advice. As Bérout makes clear throughout the poem, and as Mark finally realizes toward the end, the barons’ interest in bringing the treason to light and stopping the affair is always tainted by self-interest.

The barons are ultimately doomed, and their identities as “traitors” confirmed, by Arthur. His knights have already presented a picture of the barons as weak, effeminate, skulking about to get rid of the lovers, whom they both hate and fear. It is Arthur, though, who speaks directly to Mark and make it clear that it is his responsibility as king to take control:

whoever recommended
this outrage to you committed a terrible offense;
he is certainly disloyal!
You are easily manipulated.
You should not believe slander!

⁴⁹ Giving advice was, in fact, an important aspect of a baron’s role in the Middle Ages. When Mark gets Ogrin’s letter from the lovers, he has it read before the barons so he can get advice (2526-2530). Dinas, one of the good barons—good because he is both loyal to Mark and to the lovers—remarks “that giving poor advice to one’s rightful lord/ is the worst offense anyone can commit” [*Qui son droit seignor mesconselle/ Ne peut faire greignor mervelle*] (2543-44).

[*qui te conselle.*
Tel outrage si fait merveille:
Certes,” fait il, “sil se desloie”
Te es legier a metre en voie,
Ne dois croire parole fause.] (4141-4146)

Arthur lumps the guilty, “disloyal” barons in with the guilty, “easily manipulated” Mark. Even when the scandal dies down, they cannot leave it alone: “But in spite of this harmony, the three villains / were eager for more treachery [*Mais, qui q’ait pais, li trois felon / Sonte en esgart de traïson*]” (4271-4272). The barons’ villainy knows no bounds. As Varvaro notes, it seems “inherent in their very nature, an immutable characteristic which renders them odious [...] their behaviour is always conditioned by this unchangeable quality, to which they seem desperately and inexorably condemned by the poet right up to their deaths” (106).⁵⁰ But these essential identities are complicated; their categorization as traitors seems to stem not just from their innate need to stir things up, but from a societal imbalance: their own pettiness and their method of revelation outweigh the fact of the crime itself; the ideal of a happy kingdom, where the queen is good and virtuous, and the protector is heroic and loyal, outweighs the ugly truth of the adultery at the center of it. The barons are blamed throughout the poem for basically disrupting the peace, the illusion which everyone wants to believe. In another poem, without Béroul’s explicit and repeated condemnation of them, they could seem almost appealing in their tenacity.⁵¹ They are, in a way, villainized for having the wrong

⁵⁰ Varvaro notes that “medieval narrators tended to treat this kind of maliciousness as an innate/ quality needing no rational or psychological explanation; as a result the traitors were all absorbed into a single family, that of Ganelon” (132-33, note 46).

⁵¹ Varvaro makes a similar point: “Tristan’s enemies act in a perfectly legitimate manner, exploiting rights which no one dreams of contesting. But this does not mean that they can evade the charge of wickedness.

priorities: fact over nuance, truth over appearance. Moreover, they cut themselves off from the support of other knights by using tactics that are clearly read as feminized: they work through gossip and deceit, refusing to rely on the male privilege of physical combat. The barons add a fascinating and complicated layer to the text's construction of treason.

“a terrible injustice”: Mark and Tristan

While the “traitor” barons pose the most consistent threat to the lovers, it is ultimately Mark who poses the most dangerous, particularly to Iseut. Mark's weakness in handling the barons extends to his tenuous grasp on legal procedures, too.⁵² If treason's definition in Béroul is blurred, clouded, so is much of the legal process. Mark changes the law to suit his needs, with various motivations but similar consequences. Mark's freewheeling approach to justice has unambiguous and frightening implications for the lovers, especially Iseut. The gendered consequences of treasonous adultery are made clear in the long sequence of the lovers' capture and condemnation to the stake. On the one hand, Mark emasculates Tristan, punishing him by not allowing him the typical male privilege of fighting to prove his innocence. On the other, his decision to hand Iseut over to the lepers instead of burning is also gendered, punishing her for her alleged

On the one hand their evil nature condemns them a priori, on the other it is they themselves who bring the nature of the lovers' relationship to Marc's notice and inevitably impose on him the duty of intervening: it is they who upset the social harmony. This they do legally but none the less evilly” (109).

⁵² Medieval law is notoriously a stickler for procedure. Beaumanoir cites the example of a man who, while in court, has the charges against him changed to treason, and thus moves away from the judge to consult with his family. The appellant seizes the opportunity to ask that the defendant be found guilty (§923, p.326). The defendant is merely warned to follow procedure (and, apparently, not leave until dismissed), but Beaumanoir states that if he had actually left the court that day (to deal with the new charges), he would have forfeited his case (§924, p.326-7).

wantonness. Both lovers are constantly in mortal danger because Mark flouts the rules of justice, but only Iseut is subjected to a directly sexual threat of punishment.

One of the basic rules of law which Mark mishandles is that of *flagrante delicto*, or catching illicit lovers in the act.⁵³ Mark seems incapable of applying the law fairly. The first example of this happens when a wounded Tristran heedlessly bleeds all over the floor that the evil dwarf Frocin and the barons have sprinkled on the floor between his and Iseut's bed, leaving proof of their affair (729-35). The lovers are thus caught as close to the act as possible. Triumphantly, "you are proven guilty," said the king. / "Your denial is worthless" ["*Provez estes, ce dist li rois, / Vostre escondit n'i vaut un pois*"] (779-780). Mark, as both medieval law and Bérout himself make clear, would have been within his rights to slay both of them. As R.H. Bloch explains, "According to medieval custom, if a man captures his wife in a compromising situation with another man, he has the right to slay both wife and lover, again without risk to himself. In contrast to the elaborate procedures governing all other hand-to-hand struggles, the regulations affixed to the slaying of adulterers in *flagrante delicto* are minimal" (240). However, custom also dictated that the slaying be immediate. Beaumanoir states clearly that any delay is illegal:

But a husband who wants to take such a vengeance on his wife must be careful not to let the moment of the act go by, for if he killed either the man or the wife after the man had left and then offered to prove he had found them together after his prohibition, he would not save himself from being drawn and hanged, since he had let the moment of the act go by. (§934, p. 331)

⁵³ For more on this, see R.H. Bloch, especially p. 54-57.

That the killer would be “drawn and hanged,” the punishment for treason and murder (treacherous killing), indicates just how serious any delay is; it completely changes the nature of the act from justified homicide to murder.⁵⁴ Mark, mistakenly, elects to kill them the following day: “Tristran, tomorrow / you will certainly be put to death!” [“*Certes, Tristran, demain, ce quit, / Soiez certains d’estre destruit*”] (781-782). There is no explanation for this delay; presumably, Mark wants a much bigger spectacle than a midnight punishment. Interestingly, while Mark seems all too aware of the barons’ rights to advise him, and their power to fight him when he refuses to follow their advice, he does not seem to recognize—or care, at this point—about what he can and cannot legally do, even as king.

The fact that Tristran allows himself to be taken off without a fight suggests that no one quite understands how willing Mark is to let himself be ruled by emotions and not law. As Bérout explains, Tristran assumes that what Mark has meant is that he would be allowed to fight the charges in battle, an *escondit*, the next day:

For there is no one at your court
 who, if he slanderously claimed
 that I had a sinful relationship
 with the queen,
 would not have to meet me in armed combat.

[*Qar il n’a home en ta meson,
 Se disoit caste traïson
 Que pris eüse driërie
 O la roïne par folie
 Ne m’en trovast en chanp, armé*] (799-803)

⁵⁴Diverres explains the problem with Mark’s actions: “Had Mark killed Iseut and Tristan immediately on finding the blood-stains, he would have been entirely within his rights, but by delaying and then condemning them to death without first granting them a trial or acceding to Tristan’s request for a judicial combat with his accusers, he would, according to thirteenth-century custom, have been committing culpable homicide” (25). Varvaro makes the same point (99).

Béroul repeats this information: “He expected to defend himself on the battlefield; / therefore, he did not want to show disrespect / for the king by taking action now” [*“Bien se quidoit par champ defendre; / Por ce no vout envers le roi / Mesfaire soi por nul desroi”*] (818-820). He knows that there is no one in Cornwall who can best him, so he leaves peacefully. His trust in his physical prowess explains his willingness to leave Iseut undefended for the time being. Mark, though, has no intention of letting the best knight in the land fight at all:

If Tristran had known
 that he would not be permitted to defend himself
 he would have preferred to be torn limb from limb
 rather than allow either of them to be bound.

[...]

But if he had known the truth
 and had known what was to become of them,
 he would have killed all three of them,
 and the king could not have saved them.

[*Ja, se Tristran ice seüst
 Que escondire nul leüst,
 Mex se laisast vif depecier
 Que lui ne lié soufrist lier*

...

[*Qar, s’il seüst ce que en fut
 Et ce qui avenir lor dut,
 Il les eüst tüez toz trios
 Ja ne les en gardast li rois.*] (809-824)

Tristran has no idea that this right will be denied him. Knights were typically allowed to defend themselves, or act as champions for others, on the battlefield. In refusing Tristran

this privilege, Mark is not only insulting his classed status as a knight, but also his masculine identity as a fighter.⁵⁵

There is intra-textual evidence for this argument, too. The people reject the idea that the lovers, not slain immediately, are still not to be given a trial: “King, you would be committing a terrible injustice / if they were not tried first; / wait until afterwards to kill them. Sir, have mercy!” [“*Rois, trop feriez lai pechié, / S’il n’estoient primes jugié. / Puis les desrui. Sire, merci!*”] (885-887). Mark is clearly past the point of rationality: “Maybe I will be held accountable for it later, / But leave me in peace now” [“*Se j’en sui araisnié jamais, / Laissez m’en tot ester en pais*”] (893-4). Knowing that he may very well be in the wrong here, Mark cannot gain control over his emotions. He has the rest of the night to think it over and change his mind, permit an *escondit* or other kind of trial, but he stands by his decision. Diverres suggests that Mark’s behavior is closer to “private vengeance, which might have been justifiable in earlier centuries, but which, in theory at least, was no longer so in the second half of the twelfth century, by which time it had been firmly established that the king should act within the letter of the law” (28-9). Thus, we see that Mark is guilty of betrayal as well, betraying the law, his role as king in upholding the law, and the trust which Tristan still has in his uncle and king.

“a worse fate”: Mark and Iseut

Once the process starts the next day, Mark’s handling of the punishment goes from bad to worse, especially for Iseut. Mark gathers everyone, and “announced and

⁵⁵ Diverres notes that: “Strict rules for allowing a defendant to choose a judicial combat as an alternative to a trial by jury are still laid down by Bracton, indicating that this practice was still widely used in the middle of the thirteenth century” (25). He is citing pages 385-386 of Bracton’s text.

proclaimed / that he intended to have his nephew and wife / burned on a pyre” [*“Li rois lor a dit et monstré / Qu’il veur faire dedenz un ré / Ardoir son nevo et sa feme”*] (881-883). Tellingly, the lovers are described not by name, but by their relationship to Mark, underscoring the level of betrayal. This returns us to the question with which this chapter opens: the burning is clearly a punishment for betrayal, not simply adultery. Tristran, finally realizing that he is not going to be allowed to fight, manages to escape by jumping out of a cliff-side church window. Bérout notes that for Tristran, “It was better to jump / than to be burned alive in public!” [*“Mex veut sallir que ja ses cors / Soit ars, voiant tel aiinee”*] (946-947); the combination of the punishment itself and the publicity of it all is enough to make Tristran take the only chance he has, no matter how dangerous.

However, Mark has Iseut at his disposal and proceeds with the burning. If the people are upset over Mark’s decision to deny both lovers a trial, they are even more outraged when he continues to execute Iseut alone. Dinas, the seemingly sole voice of reason among Mark’s knights, tries to save her: “You want to have her burned / without a trial; that is not honorable, / since she has not confessed to the crime. / It will be a tragedy if you have her burned” [*“Vos la volez sanz jugement / Ardoir en feu: ce n’est pas gent, / Qar cest mesfait ne connoist pas. / Duel ert, se tu le suen cors ars”*] (1097-1100).⁵⁶ Everyone realizes that Mark is taking the law into his own hands, and Iseut will not have a chance to talk her way out of this one.

Bound and bloody, Iseut is a shocking spectacle that Bérout emphasizes to the hilt. She is crying, weak, helpless, terrified: “The king had her bound / at the urging of

⁵⁶ Interestingly, Dinas refuses to watch, to participate (1135-1140); this is one more way in which he distinguishes himself from the villainous men in Mark’s court.

the three barons, / and had tied her wrists so tightly / that blood was flowing down her fingers” [*“Si l’avoit fait lier li rois, / Par le conmandement as trois, / Qu’il li out si les poinz estroiz / Li sanc li est par toz les doiz”*] (1051-1054). The people, completely on the side of the lovers, cannot stand the sight of their queen: “You should have heard how they grieved for her / and how they implored God’s mercy!” [*“Qui ot le duel qu’il font por li, / Com il criënt a Deu merci!”*] (1075-1076). The “traitors” are not the guilty queen they have before them, but the barons, those who bring the treason to light and force Mark and the whole kingdom to look at the truth of the situation. Bérout describes Iseut in great detail, from the way that “Tears flowed down her face” [*“L’eve li file aval le vis”*] (1145), to the way “Her hair reached to her feet / and was held by a gold net” [*“Si cheval hurtent a ses piez, / D’un filet d’or les ot trechiez”*] (1149-50). Her body is on display, thanks to the “fitted tunic” [*“un bliaut”*] she is wearing (1146). It is femininity tied to the stake, her beauty and allure adding to the pity she evokes: “Anyone who saw her face and figure / would have to have a very cruel heart / not to feel pity for her” [*“Qui voit son cors et sa fachon, / Trop par avroit le cuer felon / Qui n’en avroit de lié pitié”*] (1151-1153). Bérout has already mentioned that she is bound, twice, but the description ends with a reminder that she is completely passive, static, except for the tears and blood which flow down: “Her arms were tied very tightly” [*“Molt sont li braz estroit lié”*] (1154). She is a tableau, a striking image of the female form completely subjected to Mark and the barons’ irrational judgment.

Iseut is not burned, however. Mark decides instead to subject her to an even worse punishment, and one more clearly related to the nature of her offense. A band of lepers

approaches Mark and offers to take Iseut off of Mark's hands. Many scholars have noted that lepers in the Middle Ages were often thought to be monstrous victims of lust, and leprosy a sexual disease. But the lepers represent not just carnality and disease, unbridled lust and decay, but the grotesqueness of royal justice gone amok.⁵⁷ Mark is willing to cede authority to the lowest of social outcasts. The "horribly deformed" [*"A merveille par fu desfait"*] leader of the lepers (1157), Yvain, and "a good hundred of his companions" [*"Bien out o lui cent conpaignons"*] are there to watch the burning (1159). Béroul emphasizes the horrific appearance of the lepers, preparing the audience to understand just how awful their proposal will be: "Never have you seen people so ugly, / tumorous, and deformed!" [*"Ainz ne veïstes tant si lait / Ne si boçu ne si desfait"*] (1161-2). Yvain thinks the fire is not enough because "it will not last long" [*"Ceste justise durra poi"*] (1168). His interpretation of the punishment shows how little it has to do with legal retribution or justice at this point. It is yet another exchange of women. The suggested punishment is not enough: "The hot fire will quickly consume her, / and the wind will scatter her ashes. / The fire would die out, and the punishment / would not outlast the embers" [*"Molt l'avra tost cil grante feu arse / Et la poudre cist venz espars. / Cest feu charra: en cest brese / Ceste justise ert tost remese"*] (1169-1172). He has a better idea:

you can punish her in such a way
that she will live on in disgrace
and will wish she were dead,
and everyone who hears about it
will respect you all the more.

⁵⁷ Giving the woman accused of a sexual transgression to lepers is a literary trope of sorts, as Kathy M. Krause points out in her discussion of the "Empress of Rome" stories in "Virgin, Saint, and Sinners: Women in Gautier de Coinci's *Miracles de Nostre Dame*" (40).

*[Tel justise de li ferez
Qu'ele vivroit, et sanz valoir
Et que voudroit mex mort avoir
Et que nus n'en orroit parler
Qui plus ne t'en tenist por ber.]* (1174-78)

Yvain offers a lasting, indeterminate period of suffering. In his plan, she will suffer emotionally, in “disgrace,” and will “wish” to be dead. Her mental anguish will be a fitting punishment to the mental anguish, the suspicion, of Mark, who wants to know “how she can live and yet want to die” [*“Qu'ele vivë et que ne valle”*] (1182). He also links it explicitly and directly to Mark’s social standing: the punishment he has in mind will earn Mark the “respect” he has been sorely lacking.

The homosocial bonding here is clear. Mark declares that: “Now he who can describe the worst punishment, / in the name of God the King, / will have my undying friendship” [*Qui orendroit tote la pire / Seüst, por Deu le roi, eslire, / Que il n'eüst m'amor tot tens*] (1187-89). The relationship between the men, cutting across the most obvious of physical and class barriers, will be forged through the body of a woman and her punishment. Yvain’s plan is simple and horrendous: Iseut will be subjected to constant rape.

You see that I have a hundred companions here;
give us Iseut to be our common property.
No lady ever had a worse fate:
Sir, our lust is so strong!
No lady in the world could tolerate
a single day of relations with us!

*[Veez, j'ai ci compaignons cent:
Yseut nos done, s'ert commune,
Païor fin dame n'ot mais une
Sire, en nos a si grant ardor!*

*Soz ciel n'a dame qui un jor
Peüst souffrir nostre convers]* (1192-1197).

Burns points out that this passage in particular showcases the binary in which Iseut seems to be trapped: is she “a courtly lady who merits legal defense by valiant knights or an oversexed woman who should be led away to live and sleep with lecherous lepers” (*Bodytalk* 209).⁵⁸ The graphic brutality implied in his claim that their “lust is so strong,” along with the repetition of the fact that there are so many lepers, underscores just how horrifying the prospect is. As Blakeslee points out, this is “a far more horrible fate” than the typical punishment (71). Yvain also repeats the fact that “no lady” could stand such a punishment for more than a day. Thus, like Mark’s refusal to allow Tristan to fight, it works to punish the accused on both classed and gendered levels.

Although it would seem that the rapes would be the greatest outrage, Yvain implies, in a long and detailed passage, that the deprivation of luxury and status is equally appalling:

Our ragged clothes stick to our bodies;
with you she was accustomed to luxury,
to beautiful furs and pleasures;
she learned about fine wines
in your great halls of dark marble.
If you give her to us lepers,
when she sees our squalid hovels
and shares our dishes
and has to sleep with us,
and when, instead of your fine food, sire,
she has only the scraps and crumbs

⁵⁸ Although Burns crafts a careful argument overall in *Bodytalk*, there is something disturbing about her seeming reluctance to call Yvain’s proposal what it is: a sentence of gang-rapes. In another work, Burns refers to the rapes as “sexual liaisons she would be forced to form with social outcasts” (“Lovers Lie” 90). Miyashiro refers to Yseut’s presumed plight as “forced prostitution” (514). While the use of the term “forced” by both scholars obviously indicates their understanding that this is sex against Iseut’s will, none of the euphemisms get to the heart of the matter.

that are given to us at the gates—
 by the Lord in heaven,
 when she sees our ‘court’
 and all its discomforts,
 she will rather be dead than alive.
 Then that viper Iseut will know
 that she has sinned,
 and she will wish she had been burned to death.

*[Li drap nos sont au cors aers;
 O toi soloit ester a honor,
 O vair, o gris et o baudor;
 Les buens vins i avoit apris
 Es granz soliers de marbre bis.
 Se la donez a nos meseaus,
 Qant el verra nos bas bordeaus
 Et eslira l’escouellier
 Et l’estovra a nos couche,
 Sire, en lei de tes beaus mengiers
 Avra de pieces, de quartiers
 Que l’en nos envoi’a ces hus—
 Por cel seignor qui maint lasus,
 Qant or verra la nostr cort,
 Adonc verra si desconfort.
 Donc voudroit miex morir que vivre;
 Donc savra bien Yseut la givre
 Que malement avra ovré;
 Mex voudroit ester arse en un ré.] (1198-1216)*

The comparisons in this long and disturbing passage are stark: “ragged clothes” in place of “furs,” “hovels” in place of “great halls of dark marble,” “scraps and crumbs” instead of “fine wines.” For the leper, it is as much about the loss of luxury and status as it is about the rapes. It is “when she sees our ‘court’ / and all its discomforts” that “she will rather be dead than alive.” The change of status is what will make her “wish she had been burned to death.” The “viper” image links Iseut to Eve and temptation; the pain and disgrace, the misery, will teach her “that she has sinned.” It is a retroactive process. She will not know that she has done wrong until she has been punished. The punishment will,

as it often did in the Middle Ages, help categorize the crime, rewrite it according to the punisher's will. Burns notes that "Life with these lascivious men would provide a more appropriate punishment for the adulterous queen than death at the stake, Yvain implies, because Iseut's debauched sexual coupling with Tristan, formerly covered up by the elegant raiment of King Marc's court, will finally be revealed for the putrid sexual conduct that it is" (*Bodytalk* 211). By giving Iseut to the lepers to be raped repeatedly, Mark will be regaining control of his wife's sexuality, no longer fit for his use. Blakeslee notes that the punishment is especially appropriate: "Not only will she share their miserable existence, but she whose passion was too great will become the object of their monstrous lust. Presumably, she will become infected in her turn and will contract the *grant ardor* that, in replacing her death at the stake, will appropriately and continuously punish her incontinent lust" (71-2). But in addition to being a punishment for sexual misconduct, the rapes are also a punishment for choice—Iseut chose to have the affair, and the only real way to punish that is to remove her power to choose altogether in a brutally appropriate, to Mark, manner.

Mark is transfixed by the idea, keeping Iseut and everyone watching in suspense as to what his choice will be. Béroul thus shows Mark's weakness once again: he has already flouted legal procedure once, and is about to do it again—all at the urging of a leper, a social outcast. Mark "listened to him and stood there / a long time without moving; / he had understood what Yvain had said" [*Li rois l'entent, en piez estut / Ne de grant pice ne se mut. / Bien entendi que die Ivain*] (1217-19). Iseut, more to the point, also understands, and begs for mercy: "Have me burned here instead of giving me to

them!” [*“Ainz que m’i doignes, are moi ci”*] (1222). This may be the only time in the poem that her bravado escapes her. She herself has mentioned the possibility of being burned, drawn and hanged, buried alive—but never anything close to this. In an ironic echo of her statement in the opening scene that “I would rather be burned alive / and have my ashes scattered in the wind / than ever in my life to love / any man except my lord” [*“Mex voudoire que je fuse arse, / Aval le vent la poudre esparse, / Jor que je viv que amor / Aie o home qu’o mon seignor”*] (35-38), Iseut begs for the punishment she has been trying to avoid.

But betraying justice once again, just as he has done by denying Tristran the right to trial by battle, Mark decides to listen to the lepers. Mark hands Iseut over, and for a brief time, she is actually in the control of the lepers. For one terrifying moment, Iseut is literally in the hands of hundreds of diseased men waiting to rape her: “The king gave her to him, and he took her” [*“Li rois li done, et cil la prent”*](1223). Lacy argues that the “worst hardship” the lovers face is their exile in the woods (“Fact and Belief” 2), but it is difficult to imagine a darker moment in the poem than this. The scene is one of chaos, and the sheer number of leper-rapists is overwhelming: “There were fully a hundred lepers, / and they all crowded around her. / Everyone who heard their wails and cries / was filled with pity” [*“Des malades i ot bien cent, / Qui s’aünent tot entor li. / Qui ot le brait, qui ot le cri, / A tote gent en prent pitiez”*] (1224-1227). Right at the height of the terror, pathos, and chaos, however, Bérout shifts the scene into comedy. The lepers take their prize, Iseut, and happen to head right towards Tristran, who has lived through his jump off the cliff and come back to rescue Iseut. The most serious and disturbing

episode of the poem is thus concluded by a mock-battle in which Tristran fights the lepers off but is too courtly to actually kill them (1268-70).⁵⁹ Given the absolutely atrocious plans they have for Iseut, this shows Tristran's astoundingly noble nature. Yet the comedy with which the scene ends cannot erase the terror of the punishment that Iseut comes disturbingly close to actually suffering. In a series of legally dubious decisions, Mark attempts to regain and then display his control over his wife and nephew. While both are put in peril and denied the typical rights of the accused, a point Bérout makes clear by depicting the indignation of the knight Dinas and the people of Cornwall, only Iseut faces a punishment specifically designed to reduce her to her sex and sexuality. The clear display of Iseut's bound femininity at the stake underscores the threat of the rapes she is then forced to imagine and very nearly suffer. Her sexual betrayal of Mark is more than matched by his sexualized betrayal of the legal process to which she ought to be entitled.

“whether the king / is angry or reasonable”: Mark and the Lovers

There is, of course, a more benign, if still puzzling, example of Mark's willingness to flout legal customs: the nap scene. Coming upon the lovers, who have fled into the forest after Tristan has rescued Iseut from the lepers, Mark is within his rights as both king and husband to kill them. R.H. Bloch devotes a large section of his book to this very scene. Outlaws, as Bloch notes, were fair game for anyone to kill (240). As the lovers are both outlaws, neither one having been subjected to their sentence yet, Mark could kill them both then and there perfectly legally; Beaumanoir states clearly that

⁵⁹ Bérout states adamantly: “Tristran had no desire to lay a hand on any of them / or strike or hurt them” [*Tristan n'en vost rien atochier / Ne enteste ne laidengier*] (1257-8).

defendants who escape are assumed to subject themselves to the presumption of guilt (§1160, p. 422). More importantly, Mark comes across the lovers sleeping next to each other; this would be close enough for him to invoke the charge of *flagrante delicto* and kill them both for their obvious adultery. Bloch argues that given the combination of circumstances, Mark has not only the right, but the “obligation to slay them” (240). Beaumanoir explicitly says that if the couple has been warned to stay away from each other, as Tristan and Iseut have, the husband cannot be charged if he kills them upon finding them simply “lying together” (§1637, p.597). The forester who has found them for him certainly expects Mark to kill them: “if you do not now take cruel vengeance, / you have no rightful claim on this land” [*“Rois, s’or n’en prens aspre venjance, / N’as droit en terre, sanz doutance”*] (1903-4).⁶⁰ Mark’s role as king is tied to his control over his family, his wife and nephew, and his distribution of justice

Yet once again, Mark does not follow the expected procedure. Bérout explains Mark’s thought process clearly. They are both clothed, for one thing: “if she had been naked that day, / tragedy would have befallen them” [*“(Se ele fust icel jor nue, / Mervelles lor fust meschoiet)”*] (1808-9). More importantly, they are separated by Tristan’s sword (1806). This gives him pause, and this pause is simply the first step in his mishandling of the situation.⁶¹ Mark approaches “With his sword drawn” [*“L’espee*

⁶⁰ Beaumanoir cites the case of a man who is released by the king for killing a man who simply claims to have cuckolded him (§932, p.330). He admits that this happened before his time, but states that “we have seen men released three times in the king’s court before we wrote this book” for cases in which the adultery was actually witnessed (§933, p. 330).

⁶¹ R.H. Bloch argues that this scene represents a basic shift in the ideology of kingship; Mark moves, here, from being a feudal king, responsible for upholding justice as his barons would expect in their mutual sharing of power, to being a monarch, responsible only for upholding justice as he himself sees fit. He also

nue”] (1987), but cannot bring himself to slay either one once he realizes that, in addition to being clothed, “there was a space between them / and that their mouths were not touching, / and when he saw the naked sword / which was separating them” [“*q’entre eus dues avoit devise / La bouche o l’autre n’ert jostee, / Et qant il vit la nue espee / Qui entre eus dues les desevroit*”] (1996-1999). The homosocial, if not homoerotic, implications are clear: the sight of Tristan’s sword lying between the two is enough to make Mark lower his.⁶² Burns argues that “It is as if he views that space between Tristan and Iseut as a place held open for him in the triangular love relationship; he could be between them, lying next to them both” (*Bodytalk* 217). He sees it as a sign of their innocence: “It is reasonable to conclude that, / if they loved each other sinfully, / they would not be dressed, / and there would not be a sword between them” [“*Bien puis croire, se je ai sens, / Se il s’amasent folement, / Ja n’i eüsent vestement, / Entrë eus dues n’eüst espee*”] (2006-2009). He has learned, it seems, from the burning fiasco, and thinks that his “people would have condemned” [“*Ce sera laide reparlance*”] him if he and Tristan had fought (2019). Instead, he leaves his glove (2041) on her face, takes her ring (2044), and switches out the swords (2049-50).⁶³

Crucially, Mark looks at the evidence in front of him and determines that “They have no illicit intent” [“*De fole amor corage n’ont*”] (2013). This moment demonstrates

links this to a shift from shame to guilt. Given that we have already seen Mark decide upon his own method of justice, it may be too much to say, as he does, that “the fate of the feudal world hangs in the balance of Mark’s raised sword” (241).

⁶² Burns argues that “It is as if he views that space between Tristan and Iseut as a place held open for him in the triangular love relationship; he could be between them, lying next to them both” (*Bodytalk* 217).

⁶³ Burns argues that ‘If Iseut sleeps silently in the forest interlude beneath the watchful eye of King Marc, she is not the classic ‘sleeping beauty’ whose body is coveted and fetishized in courtly romance’ (*Bodytalk* 225). In Gottfried, however, she clearly is (237).

how problematic the concept of treason is. As Chaucer's Criseyde will find out, and as Mark clearly still has to learn, representing intent is a tricky business. Appearances can be deceptive, and in cases of treason, appearances almost always are. Tristran and Iseut are clothed, and have the sword between them, and yet are still completely guilty of treasonous adultery. In one of the text's greatest ironies, their innocent appearance is completely inadvertent here, unlike the cunning and manipulative displays of innocence they manufacture elsewhere in the poem. Interestingly, the lovers misread Mark just as he has misunderstood them. Upon waking and seeing the glove and sword, Tristran tells his squire that Mark "wants people to see him capture us, / have us burned publicly, and scatter our ashes" [*"Voiant le pueple, nos veut prendre. / Faire ardoir et venter la cendre"*] (2119-20). Clearly, the flour episode has ruined Tristran's previous trust in Mark's willingness to adhere to typical legal procedure. Mark's betrayal has thus made it impossible for Tristran and Iseut to assume that Cornwall or its king will ever offer security again. When the lovers do decide to try to return to Cornwall, the hermit Ogrin assures them that Mark "cannot deny" [*"Ce ne puet il metre en descort"*] (2375) their request because his last attempt to deny them the medieval version of due process failed so spectacularly: "nobles and commoners alike saw this" [*"(Cortois le virent et vilain)"*] (2378). The lovers have learned, though, and Iseut wisely asks Tristran "not to leave the country / until you know whether the king/ is angry or reasonable with me" [*"Que ne partez de cest pais / Tant qos saciez comment li rois / Sera vers moi, iriez ou lois"*] (2812-2814). Their own treacherous behavior has been countered in unexpected ways by both the barons and Mark. They will take no more chances.

“you will not believe me”: Iseut’s Protective Equivocal Speech

Returning to the opening scene helps explain just what is at stake for Iseut and her part in the treasonous affair. Equivocating is not just exploiting weaknesses in expectations and language, but surviving: the punishments for treason and treasonous adultery for women, in particular, were harsh. But as Bérout makes clear, Mark is not above adapting law and punishment as he sees fit. Iseut has recognized this from the start; moreover, she knows that it is not necessarily the adultery itself that matters, but the mere suspicion of it. As she reminds Tristran, she is alone in Cornwall (174). She has no one to help her. McCracken points out that this is a dangerous position for a foreign queen to be in: “As a woman without kinship alliances at the court, without children through whom she might gain status and influence, and without recourse to flight or battle, the queen is completely vulnerable to the king’s definition of how or whether she should be judged” (91). Thus, she has to use what she does have in order to deflect the charges of treason: her intelligence, nerve, and facility with language.⁶⁴ Iseut has a masterful grasp on the ambiguity between truth and language. In her study of women in medieval French literature, *Bodytalk*, E. Jane Burns devotes a chapter to Bérout’s Iseut and how she uses her “bodytalk,” the “resistant doubled discourse” which “medieval heroines can speak both within and against the social and rhetorical conventions used to construct them” (7). Iseut is extremely skilled at this “resistant doubled discourse” because she must be to negotiate the suspicion of treason she is constantly facing.

⁶⁴ Iseut is a medieval Nancy Drew in the versions which cover her time in Ireland, piecing clues together to solve mysteries which always involve Tristran. Blakeslee says that “In Bérout Tristan’s role as trickster is more restricted than in any other of the French poems, while Iseut’s obtains its greatest development there” (116).

Iseut's keen awareness of how suspicion works, and the devastating effects it can have, permeates the poem. Edward J. Gallagher notes that "in Bérroul, she expresses fear of death much more frequently and a death inflicted by quite brutally explicit means" than she does in other versions (439).⁶⁵ In the opening scene, she frames punishment within the purview of her husband and king, and attaches it specifically to the idea not of guilt, of proven culpability, but mere suspicion. She tells Tristan that she must go:

If the king heard even a hint
that we were together here,
he would have me burned on a pyre,
and that would come as no surprise.
I am trembling; I am terribly afraid

*[S'un mot en puet li rois oïr
Que nos fuson ça asenblé
Il me feroit ardoir en ré.
Ne seret pas meruelle grant.
Misc ors trenble, poor ai grant.]* (190-194)⁶⁶

It is suspicion that is the great danger, the mental processes of fear. Lochrie has pointed out just "how insignificant actual secrets are by comparison" with the greater threat of secrecy itself (6). Not proof, but just "a hint" that the lovers were together would be enough to provoke Mark to punishment. The power represented by the intangible secret—are they lovers? are they not?—can, thus, only be regained physically. Iseut has a laser focus on the danger she is in from this very imbalance. She therefore rebuffs the idea that she should speak to Mark on Tristan's behalf, warning him that she is in no

⁶⁵ See his "'This too you ought to read': Bedier's *Roman de Tristan et Iseut*." *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. Ed. Joan Tasker Grimbert. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995. 425-450.

⁶⁶ In what seems like a foreshadowing of later events in which Mark misreads the evidence in front of him, she comments that "if Mark heard even a hint / that I had settled your debts, / he would take that as proof positive" [*Se il en ot un mot parler / Que vos gages face aquiter / Trop par seroit aperte chose*] of untoward relations between them (227-229).

position to do so: “I am not ready to die / or perish completely!” [*Je ne vuel pas encore morir / Ne moi du tot en tot perir*] (167-168). She reminds Tristan that Mark “strongly suspects your intentions toward me” [*Il vos mescroit de moi forment*] (169) and then asks him once again “and yet I should speak on your behalf?” [*Et j’en tendrai le parlement?*] (170). Tellingly, she states clearly that suspicion means death for her: “But if he knew of this meeting, / I am sure there is no way, Tristan, / that I could escape death” [*S’or savoit caste chevauchie, / Cel sai je bien que ja resort, / Tristan, n’avreie contre la mort*] (184-186). Yet, as Burns argues, even here, Iseut is resisting the system: “While speaking of her body as an object to be possessed by Marc or Tristan, invoking punishments of dismemberment that seem to underwrite the reduction of women to body parts, Iseut enacts that objectification ironically by speaking—the very process that defines subjectivity, not objectivity” (*Bodytalk* 207-8). Ultimately, what Bérout shows is that Iseut is well aware of her precarious position within the power structures of her marriage and Cornwall in general. Yet even with such high stakes, or perhaps because of them, she uses her speech to present herself as a possible victim while maneuvering herself out of danger.

Iseut wisely lets others do some of the work for her. Part of her lying is passive, allowing people to believe their own constructions of the truth. After the opening scene, for example, she lets Mark interrogate her, knowing full well that he thinks she has not seen him eavesdropping. He clearly thinks he has the upper hand here, and takes the opportunity to test his wife’s truthfulness. However, as Bérout demonstrates again and again, no one can outmaneuver Iseut when the weapon at hand is words. She swears to

Mark: “Sir, I have never lied to you. / Even if my life were at stake, / I would tell the complete truth; / I will not lie about anything” [“*Sire, on ques jor ne vos menti. / Se la mort doi recevoir ci, / S’en dirai je le voir du tot: / Ja n’I avra menti d’un mor*”] (395-398). This is, of course, a lie,⁶⁷ a lie that she proceeds to substantiate by telling the truth about the conversation she had with Tristran under the tree—a conversation that itself was a mixture of outright lies, lies of omission, and equivocations. As Burns argues, “Iseut’s lying is of a peculiar sort. For what this queen’s deceptive statements hide, they also cunningly reveal” (*Bodytalk* 205). The scene comes off as comedy: she grandly admits to Mark that she has seen Tristran, but warns Mark that “You will not believe me, / but I will tell you without deceit” [“*Ne croiras pas que voir en die. / Mais jel dirai sanz tricherie*”] (401-2).⁶⁸ She frames her lies as truth, and her truth as lies, statements that will be discounted anyway. Predicting that Mark will not believe her, she creates the space to say the most outrageous things, always with the explicit understanding that there are grave consequences for any misunderstandings:

Now kill me, King, if you wish.
 Yes, I saw him. It is a great pity
 that you think I love Tristran
 sinfully and deceitfully,
 and that grieves me so much that I do not care
 if you put me to death!

[*Or m’en oci, roi, se tu veus!*
Certes, gel vi: ce est grant deus;
Qar tu penses que j’aim Tristran
Par puterie et par anjen;

⁶⁷ Lacy maintains that this is in fact not a lie; when she spoke earlier and denied their affair, she was speaking to Tristran, not to Mark (“Fact and Belief” 5). However, the rest of the statement is clearly a lie.

⁶⁸ She repeats this warning at 412 and 439.

*Si ai tel duel que moi n'en chaut
Se tu me fais prendre un mal saut.*] (405-410).

She boldly reminds the king of her own powerless position, cleverly allowing him to feel his magnanimity even more keenly. Most of this particular speech is true: she has seen Tristran, and Mark's suspicion is "a great pity." Yet nothing here actually deals with whether she loves him. However, she follows this by telling Mark that "I have told you the whole truth" [*"or t'ai dit le voir sanz falle"*] which is clearly not the truth (447), and seals her statement with the promise that "If I am lying to you, you can cut off my head" [*"Se je te ment, le chief me talle"*] (448). The audaciousness with which she presents herself as an object of punishment, "ironically," as Burns notes, is matched only—with the key exception of the stake and the lepers—by her skill at evading it.

Once Mark confesses to having witnessed the scene, she keeps up the deception by chiding him:

If he had felt a sinful passion for me,
you would have seen evidence of it.
[...]
Sir, if you had not seen us for yourself,
you would surely not believe us.

[*Se il m'amast de fole amor,
Asez en veïsiez senblant.*

...

*Sire, s'or ne nos veïsiez,
Certes ne nos en creïsiez.*] (496-497; 503-504)

It seems that visual proof is better; but even when Mark has proof, it will not be enough to secure a confession or a punishment. Moreover, Mark cannot argue with her logic because it is the same as his: "I would have seen them kiss each other. / But I heard them

lamenting / and know they have no improper desires” [*“Bien les veïse entrebaisier. / Ges ai oï si gramoier, / Or sai je bien n’en ont corage”*] (303-305). Chagrined, he acknowledges that “I should have established / the truth about those two / before accepting this foolish notion” [*“Bien deïse ainz avoir prove / De ces deus genz la verité / Que je eïse fol espoir”*] (309-311). But as Béroul’s text makes clear, to “have established / the truth” is next to impossible. The rest of Mark’s speech is largely the inverse of Iseut’s: honest but factually incorrect where hers was factually correct but dishonest. More importantly, he ends it by promising to punish the dwarf Frocin, whom he holds responsible for sending him off to eavesdrop on his wife in the first place. Angry, Mark casually suggests three separate ways of punishing Frocin—hanging (270), burning (276), and castration (279).⁶⁹ This validates Iseut’s fears: suspicion leads to anger, and anger leads to punishment. All three lie in Mark’s hands, and to avoid the last, she must prevent the first.

“my own choosing”: Iseut and Equivocal Oaths

Although Iseut, as we have seen, frequently equivocates throughout Béroul’s text, Burns argues in *Bodytalk* that there are “two scenes of consummate lying and playacting, each directed by the astute and able Queen Iseut,” the opening scene, which we have already examined, and the scene at Mal Pas where Iseut makes the oath on which the barons insist (204). “Playacting” is an appropriate term, for one of the most striking aspects of Iseut’s equivocations is that they are somehow mischievous and sly while being deadly serious. Iseut is having fun being in control. This is nowhere more clear

⁶⁹ Mark ultimately gives Frocin the kind of swift justice that he does not give Tristan and Iseut: on hearing that Frocin has betrayed him, “He drew his sword and cut off the dwarf’s head” (1347).

than in the exculpatory oath, or *desraine*, she makes at the end of the fragment. Here, her equivocations are not just declarations made to Mark in private conversation, but legal statements made in front of the whole kingdom.

Medieval oaths in general are different from modern oaths, as Richard Firth Green explains: “whereas present-day witnesses swear simply to tell the truth (the promissory or evidentiary oath), the oath in folklaw procedure invoked the truth of the parties themselves as a means of proving their claims (the assertory, decisory, or judicial oath)” (92). What was proven, thus, was not the “innocence” of the accused, but the “truth of his oath” (Green 90). It is a fine distinction, but it helps explain why Iseut is able to get away with hers. Green, in fact, uses her as his primary example on equivocal oaths, pointing out that in Bérout’s text, “the verbal equivocation is even cleverer” than in other versions (405, note 31).⁷⁰ He argues that such “straightforward verbal equivocation seems generally to have been regarded as a perfectly legitimate tactic” (113).⁷¹ Green suggests that the reason such equivocations were accepted has to do with the “more disinterested communal pressure” (115). In the case of murder, for example, “if the community felt that the victim had deserved his fate and that the killing was long overdue, it might be ready to accept the defendant’s equivocation against all objections

⁷⁰ Green notes that there are similar successful equivocations in *Amis and Amiloun*, and between Lancelot and Mellyagraunce in the Arthurian tradition (113-114). He offers a real example, too: “Gregory of Tours’s story of two servants who flee to sanctuary after marrying against their master’s orders: they are lured out by his solemn oath that he will never separate them, only to find that he plans to bury them alive together” (5.3; I:282-84, qtd. on 115).

⁷¹ Green relates Iseut’s ploy to the story of “Clerk Saunders”: “May Margaret uses her lover’s sword to lift the latch of her chamber door and, having bound her eyes, carries him bodily to her bed, so that she may later swear, ‘her oth to save,’ that she had not let him in, nor had she seen him that night, nor had he set foot on her bedroom floor (Child 2:158-59), Isolt lays the groundwork for an ostensibly watertight oath before the trial even begins” (113).

by his opponent. Indeed, even the accusers themselves might have been willing to settle for such a formula as the price of not incurring a dishonorable feud” (115).⁷² Equivocal oaths, Green notes, decline by the late thirteenth century (115-116), but they continued to be incredibly popular motifs in literature. As Ralph Hexter notes in his study of equivocal oaths in literature, “Most people enjoy hearing about any sort of trickery, especially if it is at the expense of a sacred institution like the male-dominated family” (9).⁷³ Blumstein, in fact, argues that equivocation is “practiced *only* by women,” calling it “double-talk” that “women excel at” and which “men are always taken in by” (149).

Iseut finally puts the charges of adulterous treason to rest by swearing her innocence in a public oath. Miyashiro explains: “Commonly read as an oath, the *escondit* is more specifically a refutation of adultery charges” (510). Although she is forced into making the oath by the evil barons, she manages not just to make the best of a bad situation, but to use it to her advantage and gain prestigious witnesses to her innocence. Bloch points out that “According to the contractual nature of feudal kingship, the monarch was compelled to follow the dictate of the community whose collective will he expresses” (241). If the barons demand the oath, Iseut must make it. But she seems happy to accept the challenge. For one thing, medieval law had a double jeopardy clause. Beaumanoir states that an allowable defense is that “the appellee has already been appealed against in the same case, and the judgment was in his favor; for otherwise the

⁷² Although Green is discussing a case from the time of Alfred in England here, there are remarkable similarities to the other cases from literature, including Béroul’s *Tristan*.

⁷³ He suggests that the stories started out of “bitterness,” with the male tellers “hoping to justify their rule by recording the treachery of women. But almost from the start listeners were on the side of the women” due to the thrill of vicarious power and delight in the inversion (9-10). See his *Equivocal Oaths and Ordeals in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

appeals would never end” (§1798, p. 659). Thus a formal *escondit* could be a way of ending the suspicion once and for all.

Mark asks Iseut to make the oath that day, though, so she must think quickly (3226). To give herself time to plan, she proposes her own terms for the wording of the oath, and for the specific witnesses to it:

I will offer no defense
except one of my own choosing.
If I took an oath
in your court, sir, before your men,
not three days would pass before they would again say
that they wanted some other proof.

[*Escondit mais ne lor ferai,
Fors un que je deviserai.
Se lor faisoie soirement,
Sire, a ta cort, voiant ta gent,
Jusqu'a tierz jor me rediroient
Q'autre escondit avoir voudroient.*] (3233-38)

She is right about that; the barons have an insatiable need to prove her guilt. Moreover, as she implies, Mark has almost no control over his own men. As noted, medieval law was scrupulous about exact wording and correct procedure; if the prescribed format was not followed exactly, the oath was not binding. Yet Iseut cleverly suggests that if she is not allowed to create her own defensive oath, she will provide none. That would force Mark to condemn her without proper procedure, something which has failed miserably earlier in the poem. Moreover, at this point in the poem, Mark does trust her; he does believe her. So an oath of her “own choosing” is better than none.

In addition to the wording, though, she tells Mark flatly that she wants specific witnesses there. Proper legal procedure allows the defendant to have a defense; in a

bilateral ordeal, she would have a champion. As a woman, Iseut cannot fight her own battles. Yet, as she reminds Mark, she is alone with “no relative in this country” [*“n’ai en cest pais”*] to protect her (3239). Asking for a champion would be a reasonable request, but she knows that there is no way the barons or Mark would allow that champion to be Tristan. In lieu of him, she slyly suggests that King Arthur and his men be brought in, not as her champions but as simple witnesses. This request ensures that the oath cannot take place until they have time to arrive, giving her more time to plan:

If they want my oath,
 or if they demand a trial by ordeal,
 they cannot think of an ordeal so cruel
 that I will not accept it: Let them choose the date!
 But, at that time,
 I want King Arthur
 and his entourage to be there.
 If I am declared innocent before him,
 and if anyone makes accusations against me later,
 those who witnessed my judgment
 will be willing to defend me,
 whether against a Cornishman or a Saxon.

*[Se il vuelent avoir ma jure
 Ou s’il volent loi de juïse,
 Ja n’en voudront si roide guise—
 Metent le terme!—que ne face.
 A terme avrai en mié la place
 Li roi Artus et sa mesnie.
 Se devant lui sui alegie,
 Qui me voudroit après sordire,
 Cil me voudroient escondire
 Qui avront veü ma desraine,
 Vers un Cornot ou vers un Saisne.]* (3244-3254)

Once again, she is pointing to Mark’s inadequacy; she wants a real king, one who would have the wherewithal to protect her, to ensure that the procedure is valid. Granted, Mark is an interested party in the accusation, and so cannot protect her himself even if he were

“willing to defend” her. But she uses this to her advantage. She sets all the terms of the oath, reminding Mark of his own power while she instructs him to “Announce clearly that if anyone is not there, / you will confiscate his inheritance; / that way you will have no trouble with them” [*Qui n’i sera, tres bien t’afiche / Que lor toudras lor herité. / Si reseras d’eus aquité*] (3270-3272). She also sends her own messenger, Perinis, to Logres, specifically to request that Arthur “assure her protection / if the traitors ever again complain / about the lady’s loyalty” [*puis garant li porteroient / Se li felon de rien greignoient / A la dame de loiauté*] (3361-3363). As Perinis himself remarks, “Is that not a good idea?” [*Donc n’est ce bien?*] (3364).

Iseut clearly has the whole oath deception planned out ahead of time. She had to think on her feet in the opening scene of the poem, but here she has time to concoct a plan. The oath is to take place next to the “Mal Pas,” a muddy field that spectators and participants must cross over. She sends word to Tristan that he needs to be at Mal Pas; she instructs him to wear a leper’s outfit (3300-3303); and she lays out the details: “And here now is our scheme” [*Si aprenge de tel tripot*] (3304). Tristan may add in a few flourishes of his own, but this is Iseut’s plan.⁷⁴ As he does in the opening scene, Bérout calls the audience’s attention to Iseut’s cunning plan. “Now hear how crafty Iseut was” [*Oiez d’Yseut com el fu sage!*] (3882). Knowing all eyes are on her (3883-4); she makes a great show of preparing her horse to cross, but then sends him along without her (3885-98). She builds suspense, holding her audience and making sure she has as many

⁷⁴ Miyashiro notes that “Tristan defers ultimate authorial discretion to Yseut” (514). Tristan does create the comically satisfying scene of the barons stuck in the mud, sending them to cross the marsh at the soggiest part (3794-3801). The sight “made her happy, and she laughed and rejoiced” [*Joie en a grant, rit et envoise*] (3827).

witnesses as possible. Calling the conveniently stationed “leper” over, she decides to ride him across the mud instead. Loud enough for everyone to hear, she tells him to “Turn your face away and your back toward me, / and I will straddle you like a man” [*“Tor la ton vis et çaton dos: / Ge monterai conme vaslet”*] (3930-31). The sexualized imagery is clear⁷⁵ and continues, though with a role reversal. Iseut is on top.

He turned around, and she mounted.
Everyone watched them, kings and counts alike.
She kept her thigh pressed against his crutch.
He plodded on,
pretending to stumble several times.
He made a great pretense of suffering.⁷⁶
The fair Iseut was riding him like a horse,
with one leg on each side!

[*Torne le dos, et ele monte.
Tuit les gardent, et roi et conte.
Ses cuisse tient sor son puiot:
L’un pié sorlieve et l’autre clot,
Sovent fait senblant de choier,
Grant chiere fai de soi doloir.
Yseut la bele chevaucha,
Janbe deça, janbe dela.*] (3933-40)

Iseut has obviously thought this through. She uses the cultural norms and codes at her disposal, commanding the leper, but also creates a sexy scene. She is flaunting the adultery even as she works to prove her legal innocence. Helene Newstead notes that this

⁷⁵ Lacy notes this on page 235 of his edition.

⁷⁶ Tristan clearly enjoys his role as the mad victim of leprosy, and this is one scene where his equivocating is just as sharp as Yseut’s. He tells Mark that he “had a most courtly lady. / Because of her, I now have these ugly sores” [*“Molt avoie cortoise amie./ Por lié ai je ces boces lees”*] (3762-63), which is true since this is all part of Iseut’s plan.

scene is “broadly comic” (1081), which is of course true.⁷⁷ But there is more going on here. While Sally L. Burch argues that the guise of Tristan as a leper is necessary to create the (illusion of an) ordeal,⁷⁸ it seems to me that what it recalls most is the scene earlier in which Iseut is handed over to the lepers. Miyashiro is one of the few scholars who comments on it: “The use of the leper image for the *tripot* elliptically recalls Mark’s punishment by giving Yseut to the community of lepers” (514). Iseut is reclaiming her sexuality, and her power to choose how she uses it. Accused of treasonous adultery throughout the poem, she concocts a scene which highlights her body, her sexuality, and her total lack of fear: she is not afraid of the leper between her legs, or the oath she is about to make. She recasts the scene of her greatest peril—being handed over to the lepers to be raped as punishment for her adultery—by choosing, in front of everyone, to ride one to her own trial for treason. Everything, from the gendered implications of the charge and the possible punishment, to her own self-defense, is under her control.

⁷⁷ See “The Equivocal Oath in the Tristan Legend” in *Mélanges Offerts à Rita Lejeune*, 2 vols. Gembloux, 1969. 2.1077-1085.

⁷⁸ In an interesting though ultimately unconvincing recent article, Burch argues that this scene actually constitutes part of an ordeal in Béroul’s text. Although outlawed in 1215 at the fourth Lateran Council, ordeals had been popular ways of establishing guilt or innocence via the concept of *judicium dei*, or the judgment of god. The accused would undergo a physical ordeal, such as the hot iron, or hot plowshares, and guilt or innocence would be decided by how well the body of the accused healed. Ordeals were frequently used when the case in question was difficult to prove one way or another, such as in cases of sexual transgression (Baldwin 329). At least two medieval queens were supposedly put through the ordeal, both for suspected adultery: Queen Emma, mother of Edward the Confessor, and Queen Cunegonde, wife of Henry. As John M. Bowers puts it, ordeals made the body “the litmus paper on which the acid of guilt might be made legible” (3); he notes that “In the early twelfth century, French aristocrats almost automatically took suspicions of their wives to this proof” (2-3). See his “Ordeals, privacy, and the lais of Marie de France.” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. 24.1 Winter 1994. 1-31.

Iseut does explicitly go through ordeals in other versions, such as Gottfried’s. Burch argues that Iseut seemingly comes in direct contact with what everyone believes to be a leper, notoriously contagious and sexually charged. When she takes her oath the next day, her physical health is equivalent to a healed hand. This, she says, is what Arthur means when he declares that everyone has both seen and heard her innocence. She points out that in line 3245 (above), Iseut mentions that she would be willing to undergo an ordeal (113). For the debate on ordeals, see Baldwin (330-334); for more on Queen Emma, see Bowers (4). For a description of Cunegonde’s ordeal, see Baldwin (345-346).

The people are excited to see Iseut “Exonerate herself” [*“Se doit deraisnier de l’outrage”*] (4107), which comes in two parts: what Arthur says, and what Iseut says. Arthur’s explanation is crucial because it reveals both what the crime was thought to be and what an innocent woman should say; it lays out the charges and what needs to be sworn to prove her innocence:

the queen will come forward,
so that all will see her, great and small,
and she will raise her right hand and swear
on relics, to God in heaven,
that never was there any love between her
and your nephew—not even once—
which could bring dishonor upon her,
and that she never had a disgraceful affair.

[*La roïne vendra avant,
Si qel veront petit et grant,
Et si jurra o sa main destre,
Sor les corsainz, au roi celestre
Qu’el onques n’ot amor commune
A ton nevo, ne deus ne une,
Que l’en tornast a vilanie,
N’amor ne prist par puterie*] (4159-66)

This procedure is public, like the earlier attempt at burning at the stake, but the key difference is that everyone will hear exactly what she is accused of, and everyone will hear exactly what she denies. Arthur’s explanation here is extremely clear: she must swear that “never,” “not even once,” did she and Tristran share a love of “dishonor,” or have “a disgraceful affair.” Arthur’s emphasis on shame suggests that any such liaison would clearly be considered a terrible scandal.

Yet as he makes clear, there is scandal no matter what. Even the accusation of treasonous adultery has brought shame to Cornwall. While still in front of everyone,

Arthur chides Mark for his handling of the situation thus far: “Lord Mark, this has gone on too long; / when she has sworn her oath, / command your barons to leave her in peace” [*“Dan Marc, trop a ice duré: / Qant ele avra eisi juré. / Di tes barons qu’il aient pes”*] (4167-4169). Arthur seems annoyed that he has even had to come to do this at all; he clearly takes it as a foregone conclusion that she will be proven innocent. The barons’ prodding, once again, has resulted in farce. And Arthur, for one, promises to uphold justice and prevent any attempt to place Iseut in such a position again: “I will have anyone hanged / who jealously accuses her of infidelity / once her trial is finished; / such a person would deserve to die” [*“Que ges ferai encore pendre, / Qui la reteront de folie / Pus sa deresne, par envie: / Digne seroient d’avoir mort”*] (4154-57). Bérout demonstrates Mark’s absolute weakness as a king by showing how strong and authoritative Arthur is. Mark acknowledges all of this: “You are right to reproach me, / for only fools listen to jealous people” [*“Tu me blasmes, et si as droit, / Quar fous est qui envieus croit”*] (4171-2). As McCracken points out, part of the reason that Mark agrees to this spectacle is that he wants to stop the barons once and for all (73-4). He simply has not been able to do so on his own; this inability results in his ultimately being shamed not for his wife’s adultery, but for his own inadequacy.

Arthur thus explains the charges directly to Iseut as she stands between the two kings (4185). The basic accusation is the same, but the terms have changed slightly; while the first pronouncement focuses on shame, the second elucidation focuses more explicitly on the sexual aspect of the crime:

This is what you are accused of:
Swear that Tristan had no love for you

that was debauched or carnal,
but only the kind that one should have
for an uncle and his wife.

[*Oiez de qoi on vos apele:
Que Tristan n'ot vers vos amor
De puteé ne de folor,
Fors cele que devoit porter
Envers son oncle et vers sa per.*] (4192-96)

His instructions are straightforward and clear. He is clearly talking about sex here, “debauched or carnal” love. Interestingly, Arthur is also asking her to swear to what Tristan felt, an inversion of gendered roles in ordeals: typically there is a male champion working to prove the innocence of the woman. As Miyashiro reminds us, an *escondit* is “more specifically a refutation or rejection of the charges: it is prefigured and formative, a preconditioned legal defense, a statement which is expected to be a denial of the charges” (515). Here, she is denying the charges not just against herself, but against Tristan, too. Iseut’s oath, based on a careful series of lies, will correct all the procedural wrongs that have come before.

Despite Arthur’s clear instructions, Iseut offers her own oath, just as she directed at 3234.⁷⁹ It speaks to the sexual act in question, but nothing else—not emotions, hers or Tristan’s. Baldwin notes that “Iseut’s counterformulation, although professing to exceed Arthur’s, in fact introduces a crucial equivocation” (337) in how she describes the charges:

I see many holy relics here.
Now hear my oath,

⁷⁹As Burns notes, “This recasting of the standard legal oath is in blatant violation of the judicial code which requires that trial by ordeal and oath be conducted according to precise verbal formulas” (“Lovers Lie” 83).

and may the king be reassured by it:
 that, in the name of God and St. Hilaire,⁸⁰
 and on these relics and this reliquary
 and all the relics that are not here
 and all those throughout the world,
 no man has ever been between my thighs,
 except the leper who made himself a beast of burden
 and carried me over the ford
 and my husband King Mark.
 I exclude these two from my oath,
 but I except no one else.
 I cannot swear it about those two:
 the leper and my lord, King Mark.
 The leper was between my legs.

*[Saintes reliques voi ici.
 Or escoutez que je ci jure,
 De quoi le roi ce aseüre:
 Si m'aït Dex et Saint Ylaire,
 Ces reliques, cest saintuaire,
 Totes celes qui ci ne sont
 Et tuit icil de par le mont,
 Qu'enter mes cuisse n'entra home,
 Fors le ladre qui fist soi some,
 Qui me porta outré les guez,
 Et li rois Marc mes esposez.
 Ces desu ost de mon soirement,
 Ge n'en ost plus de tote gent.
 De deus ne me pus escondire:
 Du ladre, du roi Marc mon sire.
 Li ladres fu entre mes janbes.]* (4198-4213)

Whereas in the opening scene her words are spoken to Tristan, but intended for Mark, here she is speaking to Mark, so that he may “be reassured,” but her words are intended to prove her innocence to everyone. It is a hyperbolic oath, much like the one Chaucer’s Criseyde will make later. Iseut swears on “all” possible relics. She explicitly denies any improper sexual act with anyone; she repeats the exclusion of the leper in place of any

⁸⁰ For more on St. Hilaire, see Miyashiro, p.524, note 12.

further explanation or adherence to Arthur's instructions, mentioning the leper more often than she mentions her husband. As Burns notes, "The privileged reader is, of course, in on the joke [...] the queen's equivocal statement deftly makes both men the referent for a single crucial act" (*Bodytalk* 205). Yet all of this is ultimately a lie, since the leper is Tristran and, as Miyashiro points out, she does not even speak his name (519).

Iseut offers to provide "further proof" [*plus*] (4216), but what she has already said is clearly good enough for the people:

God! She swore such a confident oath.
She has conducted herself correctly,
even adding more to the oath than they told her to,
and more than the traitors demanded.
She has no need for any denial
except the one heard by everyone, great and small,
concerning the king and his nephew.
She swore and vowed
that no one has ever been between her legs
except the leper who carried her
across the ford yesterday at the hour of tierce,
and her husband King Mark.
May anyone be cursed who ever again doubts her!

*['Dex!' fait chascuns, 'si fiere en jure:
Tant en a fait après droiture!
Plus i a mis que ne disorient
Ne que li fel ne requeroient:
Ne li covient plus escondit
Qu'avez oï, grant et petit,
Fors du roi et do son nevo.
Ele a juré et mis en vo
Qu'entre ses cuisse nus n'entra
Que li meseause qui la porta
Ier, endroit tierce, outré les guez,
Et le rois Marc, ses esposez.
Mal ait jamais l'en mesquerra!']* (4219-4231)

She reaps the cumulative effects of Arthur's words plus her own, despite the fact that all three versions of what she is swearing to differ. In a total reversal of her terror at the moment she is given to the lepers, it is her "confident oath" that is on display here. Nor do the people have a problem with the variation in procedure in this case. The barons, or anyone else who would still dare to "doubt" her, are "cursed." The matter is closed.

Conclusions

Burns reads the oath scene as one of triumph for Iseut: "Stationing herself elsewhere, outside the binary logic that locates women between men, this heroine speaks from a third position, one standing between marriage and adultery, truth and falsehood" (*Bodytalk* 236). Having defended herself—and Tristran, for that matter—against the charges, Iseut has reclaimed her position as honest queen, recast her moment of greatest fear and shame, and rewritten the terms of masculine legal authority. In this, she complicates Lochrie's explanation of how secrecy and gender usually work: "Through their exchange, women become the 'open secret,' a product and object of masculine ways of knowing. As open secret, the feminine is confined to masculine performances of secrecy and transmissions of knowledge. Because she does not share in the process of knowing, woman does not have the power to withhold her secret or to possess it discursively" (123). Iseut has, of course, been exchanged repeatedly—between Tristran and Mark, between Mark and the lepers, even between Mark and Arthur—and she has been made to perform the oath and proclaim her innocence, her "knowledge," publicly, at the request and under the direction of men. But she remains inscrutable throughout; two of the three exchanges have been her own choice; and ultimately she uses the very

publicity of the oath, and her mastery of equivocation, to keep herself and her secret both “open” and closed.

But the poem, even in its fragmentary form, does not end with the oath. As Barbara N. Saint-Baur points out, the fragment ends with yet another scene of the lovers escaping peril by clever, implicit deception, one which mimics the opening scene in several ways. Iseut may have triumphed at the oath, but the story is not over. One of the barons has seemingly been resurrected, and the whole cycle is starting up again. Unlike in the *Chanson de Roland*, the traitors have not been appropriately punished or stopped. The lovers remain unapologetic; the only moment of regret either one shows comes in the forest, after the potion has worn off, when Tristran realizes that “God! My uncle would have loved me so / if I had not betrayed him!” [*“Dex! Tant m’amast mes oncles chiers, / Se tant ne fuse a lui mesfez!”*] (2170-71). The end of the fragment finds Tristran in Iseut’s room, following her veiled directions to protect themselves from a hidden spy. The instability of law, order, gender, and language remains. Iseut, from the beginning of the poem, has known implicitly what others must struggle to learn: truth itself can be just as constructed as outright lies. Early in the poem, she warns Tristran: “You know very well what suspicion can do, / whether it be truth or folly” [*“Vos savez bien la mescreance, / Ou soit a voir ou set enfance”*] (223-224). It is suspicion itself that is damning, maybe more than actual knowledge. It is Iseut, the treacherous woman, who sees this most clearly, perhaps because she has the most at stake. While all the “traitors” in the poem face peril—Tristran is not allowed to fight, Mark is shamed by both his barons and Arthur, and the barons themselves are ultimately killed—it is Iseut who consistently faces

the most dire and dangerous threats. Her acute understanding of the way truth and appearances can be constructed, and in fact must be manipulated in order to avoid gendered threats, speaks to the way that gender codes, as well as legal codes, play into medieval definitions of and punishments for treason.

Chapter Three

“so it may wel seme:” Criseyde and Betrayals in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Jill Mann has argued that “Woman betrayed, woman betraying—these were the alternative images of woman with which Chaucer engaged at the outset of his writing career” (5).¹ In his fourteenth-century epic *Troilus and Criseyde*, we find both of these in the same character: Criseyde. In his choice of tale and heroine, Chaucer is drawing on a long tradition.² Criseyde (as Briseida) appears first in Dares’ history of the Trojan war, but it is not until Benoit de Sainte-Maure composes his *Roman de Troie* in the twelfth century (c. 1160) that the doomed love story between Troilus and Criseyde appears (Gordon xi). As Laura Kellogg explains, “Benoit’s Briseida is the first Cressida to love and then to forsake Troilus” (2). This is followed by Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, finished in 1287 (Meek xi). Here, Kellogg notes, “Cressida’s reputation only gets worse” (6). At best, one could say that Guido’s Cressida is an empathetic flirt; at worst, she is a manipulating opportunist who lies to Troilus even before she is sent away and who promptly reveals Trojan secrets to her Greek captors.³

Chaucer’s most immediate source is Giovanni Boccaccio’s fourteenth century *Il*

¹ See the revised version (2002) of her *Feminizing Chaucer*.

² For a full treatment of source material, see Laura D. Kellogg’s *Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s Cressida*; see also C. David Benson’s *Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature: Guido delle Colonne’s Historia Destructionis Troiae in Medieval England*.

³ Guido’s sole mitigating factor for Briseida’s actions is that she is “pliable because of great compassion” (8.196-197). However, he follows this immediately by commenting that “she did not preserve constancy of heart toward her lovers” (8.198-199). When she finds out she must be separated from Troilus, she “revealed her grief to be no less in words of lament, and was completely drenched in floods of tears” (19.135-136). This is framed, though, by the narrator to suggest that she is acting: “But oh, Troilus, what youthful credulity forced you to be so mistaken that you trusted Briseida’s tears and her deceiving caresses?” (19.159-160). All references to Guido come from *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974.

Filostrato; Criseide fares slightly better here, but not by much. In Boccaccio, she is desire itself, “*l’amarosa Criseida*” (1.3); her heart changes quickly after she leaves Troy,⁴ and Boccaccio is just as quick to blame her behavior on her gender itself.

Chaucer’s Criseyde also betrays Troilus, but as Michael Masi points out, “if we compare his treatment with that of his source in Boccaccio we cannot but be impressed by the difference of his handling, by the greater sensitivity with which he treats Criseyde” (72).⁵ The story remains largely the same: Troilus, prince of Troy, loves the beautiful widow Criseyde and is betrayed by her when she fails to return from the Greek camp to which she has been traded. In Chaucer’s version, Troilus suffers greatly at her loss and ultimately dies in battle but has an epiphany at the end of the poem, realizing that all earthly love and loss is unimportant in the grander scheme of things. Criseyde, however, lives, only to become the symbol of female fickleness and romantic changeability; she is too “slydyng of corage” to stay true to her promise to Troilus (5.825).⁶

Chaucer is clear about his heroine’s role from the beginning; the first thing we hear about Criseyde is that Troilus loves her (1.55), “And how that she forsook hym er she deyde” (1.56). The fact that she “forsook” him is apparently her defining act, but this one deed proves to be the sum of a series of actions and reactions, fractured and refracted throughout the poem. As Priscilla Martin notes, Criseyde appears at first as the villain in

⁴ She is gone in one stanza: “in a brief space he expelled Troilo and Troy and every other thought of him which was in her, either false or true” (6.8). All references to Boccaccio’s poem come from: Giovanni Boccaccio. *Il Filostrato*. Italian text ed. Vincenzo Pernicone, Trans. Robert P. apRoberts and Anna Bruni Seldis. New York: Garland Publishing, 1986.

⁵ See his *Chaucer and Gender* for a general overview of the subject.

⁶ All references to Chaucer’s text come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987.

the poem, the lying woman, “the guilty party. But this stark and sexist outline will soon be complicated” (157).⁷ What could be, and has been in his sources, a totalizing identity for Criseyde is diffused throughout the poem, largely by Chaucer’s attention to the context in which Criseyde’s betrayal occurs and to his characterization of Criseyde herself. Margaret Hallissy, in fact, compares Chaucer to a confessor: “Chaucer judges Criseyde’s sin, but also considers how circumstance mitigates guilt” (145).⁸ There are many betrayals in the poem, and Criseyde is only guilty of one of these. Chaucer carefully sets the scene of a country at war, and thus navigates between examples of political and personal treasons. How to interpret either depends largely, he shows, on circumstances and expectation; when expectation is shared, is equal, then betrayal is clear, unambiguous. When expectations do not mesh, however, the degree to which betrayal is voluntary, and thus even betrayal at all, is more difficult to determine. The first treason of the poem, for example, is political, unambiguous, and involves Criseyde only in that she is the daughter of the man who enacts it. Criseyde does eventually betray Troilus; she breaks her promises to him to return, and she lies to him about even trying to return at all. But as I will show, the poem is largely about how Criseyde attempts to avoid lying, to avoid betrayal, and how circumstances work against her ability to do so. My interest in depictions of treason in *Troilus and Criseyde* thus lies in the way Chaucer takes a stock figure of betrayal and complicates it, particularly in a story so beset with treason already.

⁷ See her *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990.

⁸ See her *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer’s Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993.

He does this in many ways. For one, unlike the other named traitors in the poem—her father Calkas, her uncle Pandarus, men in general, and Lady Fortune—Criseyde does not deliberately lie, not until the very end of the poem, and maybe not even then. Chaucer gives us example after example of Criseyde thinking carefully and speaking even more cautiously, employing curiously precise words throughout to try to express her exact intent. Moreover, he shows that her decision to remain with Diomedes is partially prompted by fear of a betrayal that would be out of her control—rape. Even the clearest evidence of Criseyde’s ‘betrayal,’ the gifts she gives Diomedes and her final letter to Troilus, never clearly spells out exactly what has happened, or when, to constitute a betrayal. The Narrator leaves us outside of Criseyde’s head at crucial moments, and the equivocal phrasing makes it difficult to pinpoint where Criseyde has failed. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen suggests, “Criseyde herself is just ambiguous enough to seem like a real woman, sufficiently in control of her intentions (which we can never fully know) to be held accountable for her behavior, but not strong enough to escape her fate, the meaning imposed on her” (157).⁹ The links to treachery Chaucer builds through emphasizing common medieval attitudes on heritage and gender are constantly mitigated by explanations and demonstrations which problematize those very links. Although her initially cautious speeches and oaths shift into hyperbolic promises, and ultimately an undeniably deceptive letter to Troilus, Chaucer shows that Criseyde never means to betray Troilus.

⁹ Her discussion of Criseyde in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* largely informs this study.

In my reading of how gender plays into the depiction of treason and betrayal in the poem, I rely on the work of several critics whose work focuses on gender in the poem. The late twentieth century and early twenty-first saw a rise in the number of scholars taking a closer look at gender in the poem, drawing in or working along similar lines as gender theorists like Eve K. Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Carolyn Dinshaw, Priscilla Martin, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Margaret Hallissy, Catherine S. Cox, and Jill Mann all privilege the question of gender in their discussions of Criseyde.¹⁰ Martin and Hallissy focus on Criseyde's position as a widow, though they vary in their conclusions. Martin mounts a tenuous defense of Criseyde, arguing that she is not allowed to have any integrity and so cannot help betraying Troilus (188), whereas Hallissy takes a slightly more apologist point of view, contending that the Middle Ages would have considered Criseyde's behavior unequivocally wrong (145-155). Dinshaw and Hansen focus on gendered roles and positions in general, both pointing out that slippage is possible; women can behave in "masculine" ways, and men can behave in "feminine" ways. Dinshaw argues that the feminine in the Middle Ages was usually seen as corporeal, earth-bound, less transcendent than the masculine; woman is "the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning" (9). She points out that woman becomes linked, "allegorically, with the wisdom that must be protected, the truth contained in the old books to be preserved by the *paterna cultura*" (20).¹¹ Dinshaw theorizes that

¹⁰ See Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989; and Catherine S. Cox's *Gender and Language in Chaucer*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

¹¹ She cites a variety of medieval *auctores*: Macrobius, for example, compares truth to women and whores (20), while Richard of Bury considers women "what must be passed through, gone beyond, left, discarded, to get to the truth, the spirit of the text" (22).

Criseyde functions along these lines in the poem, as the object of exchange between men, as the text that helps write the patriarchy. Along similar lines, Hansen debates the possibility that Criseyde, as a woman, can even have intent, can be her own subject: “The assumption that Criseyde has intentions to be consulted or even relied upon cannot by itself bring into being what was never before imagined or allowed” (172). As I will argue, both Criseyde’s status as a woman and her attempts to express her own intent are complex but vital factors in Chaucer’s presentation of his heroine and her betrayal.

In her 2002 revision of *Feminizing Chaucer*, Mann argues that Criseyde’s betrayal has less to do with gender than with a more general human tendency to change. Looking at how Criseyde falls in love with Troilus, she suggests, is vital to understanding how she decides to remain, ultimately, with Diomedes: “It is the comparability of the two processes that cleanses the betrayal of its antifeminist implications, and it is to the earlier process that we should look if we want to understand how Chaucer rescues the betrayal from an antifeminist meaning” (19). A close look at the two relationships will indeed show that many of the same concerns about safety and reputation come into play during both. But Hansen warns us not to let Chaucer off the hook entirely; challenging David Aers’s argument that Chaucer shows sympathy for Criseyde by illustrating her predicament better than she herself can, she asks “To what extent does criticism mirror without seeing the fact that the artist’s ‘insight and art,’ including the illusion that he stands outside discourse and politics himself, depend on portraying a woman as unself-conscious victim, reifying her victimization?” (143). While I agree with what Hansen sees as a need for vigorous examinations of simplistically executed depictions of

victimized women, I would not categorize Criseyde as “unself-conscious victim.” In fact, my discussion will rest fundamentally on the idea that Criseyde is very conscious of her own insecure status.

Finally, Cox mounts the most vigorous defense of Criseyde; indeed, I find myself largely agreeing with her approach. Like Cox, I am not interested in trying to figure out “what Chaucer the poet wants to do but rather what the text does or might be doing” (5). More importantly, as she notes, there is a danger for feminist scholars in “positing the sort of argument often criticized for lacking humor and being too eager to exculpate a female character. But feminists are too often silenced by the accusation of lacking humor, as if an unwillingness to overlook unpleasanties by veiling them in (masculine) humor warrants negation of a critical position” (41). Drawing on the work of all of these scholars, even though I disagree with some of their emphases and interpretations, allows me to focus more narrowly on the context and timeline of treason and betrayal in the poem, both when it intersects with gender and when it does not.

Treason in Late Fourteenth Century England

Treason, as Richard Firth Green points out, “had a far wider range of meanings in the fourteenth century than it does now, and changes in its meaning were proving a source of potential ambiguity for contemporaries” (207).¹² Marion Turner, in fact, argues that *Troilus and Criseyde* “is emphatically a product of the late 1380s” (225), particularly in its “anxiety about betrayal and urban division, a concern that could easily be explored

¹² See his *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*.

through the story of Troy” (225).¹³ As in the early French law, treason in English law stems from the merging of two distinct theories—the Germanic idea of “*treubruch*,” betrayal of any sort of mutual trust, whether that exists between social equals or not, and the Roman idea of “*lèse-majesté*,” the idea of an “insult” to authority, a strictly vertical concept (Bellamy 2).¹⁴ Bellamy notes that unlike in France, “the full Roman law doctrine of *lese-majesty* was never accepted in England” (11). The definition of treason in England were thus in constant flux; as time went on, the laws became more centered on offenses against the monarch, his family, and his rule. In 1352 Edward III codified the treason laws into a Statute of Treason, which focused on treason as a crime “committed against someone in political authority, particularly the king, his immediate family, or his judicial officers” (Green 207).¹⁵

However, this did not stop English kings from trying to expand their power and control their enemies by using and adapting treason charges at will—none more so than Richard II in what Michael Hanrahan calls “the fierce struggle for the control of treason during the 1380s” (238).¹⁶ Richard’s increasingly contentious relationship with his people and his court and parliaments was marked by the constant exchange of treason

¹³ Her *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* is a useful analysis of the turmoil surrounding Richard’s reign.

¹⁴ Much of my discussion of treason draws on John G. Bellamy’s *The Law of Treason in Late Medieval England*.

¹⁵ This statute also included the “petty treason clause,” whereby a servant killing a master, a wife killing her husband, or a priest killing his prelate were guilty of a lesser form of treason that was punished as a felony (Green 215). The gendered aspect of the clause is of course intriguing when discussing female traitors, but the clause is specific to murder, not betrayal in general.

¹⁶ See his “Seduction and Betrayal: Treason in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women*.” *Chaucer Review* 30.3 (1996): 229-238.

charges. The “Merciless Parliament” of 1388, in which many of Richard’s favorites were tried and found guilty of treason is perhaps the most striking example of how widespread (and deadly) the discourse of treason had become. But just two years earlier, the 1386 Parliament had seen Richard wield charges of treason against his enemies; later, in 1397, Richard used his influence over parliament to make them declare that any suggestion of reforming the king, government, or regality was treason (Bellamy 114).¹⁷

Treason charges were, however, not just weapons of the nobility. Turner has examined the charges of treason brought by some local London merchants against other city merchants after the Uprising of 1381. Assessing the claims which John More brings against Walter Sibyl, John Horn, and Adam Carlisle, whom he accuses of letting the rebels into the city of London in 1381, she notes the “many references to conscious oath-breaking, a manifest demonstration of treachery and bad faith” (34).¹⁸ Treason charges could thus be levied by anyone, and even though the charge against the merchants obviously relies on the fact that letting the rebels in would be helping the king’s enemies, the focus on “oath-breaking” also highlights the more traditional concept of treason as betrayal. As Bellamy warns, “There was no slavish adherence to the phraseology of the treason act of 1352. Juries, appellants, and approvers were happy to call treason what seemed to them to be treason” (105). The spectacle of the punishments of those found guilty—typically, punishment consisted of drawing and hanging, with the options of

¹⁷ Green translates the decision, from *RP* 3:408: “It was declared that if anyone at all, whatever his status or condition, should encourage or incite the commons of Parliament, or any one else, to remedy or reform anything which concerns our person, our rule, or our regality, he should, and shall, be held a traitor” (222).

¹⁸ For example, Horn is accused of speaking “feloniously, falsely, and treacherously against his allegiance [*felonice, false et proditorie contra ligeanceam suam*]” (34). The translation is Turner’s; she cites the Latin from André Réville, *Le soulèvement des Travailleurs D’Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898), 192.

disemboweling and beheading for the most reprehensible offenses—would have kept the discourse of treason alive in everyone’s mind. Turner notes that the abundance of treason charges brought in the 1380s in London alone demonstrates “the availability and easy deployment of the idea and language of civic betrayal and treachery” (38). Someone like Chaucer, a diplomat, controller of customs, and justice of the peace, would have even more access to seeing and appreciating the nuances surrounding legal ideas of treason.¹⁹

Green argues convincingly in his *A Crisis of Truth* that the older, traditional ideas about crime, including treason, continued to play a role in both popular thought and legal practice. Alongside the 1352 Statute of Treason, there remained “a personal conception of treason in which the offense was committed against someone who had good reason to trust the traitor, often because they were bound by oath” (207). This concept had less to do with behavior towards superiors, and more to do with mutually understood promises. One medieval source suggests this quite clearly: the thirteenth-century legalist Britton. In the introductory chapter on treason, Britton states that “Treason consists of any mischief, which a man knowingly does, or procures to be done, to one to whom he pretends to be a friend” (34).²⁰ He does go on to specify what he calls “High treason” as offenses against the monarch, but it is telling that the general idea is the one listed first (34). Thus, treason is an astonishingly broad concept; as Hornsby notes, for Britton it “was fundamentally the violation of a bond of trust between two people” (122). This makes sense, according to Hornsby, when one considers treason’s original place within the

¹⁹ Joseph Allen Hornsby, in *Chaucer and the Law*, makes the case that despite Chaucer’s fascination and facility with legal ideas in his texts, there is no proof he was a lawyer himself (3-4).

²⁰ *Britton: An English Translation and Notes*. Trans. Francis Morgan Nichols. Washington, D.C.: John Byrne & Co., 1901.

Germanic systems as one of many felonies: “Originally a felony was a feudal crime; it was any act which constituted a breach of the fealty or faith the vassal has pledged to his lord under the terms of the feudal contract [...] treason alone among the felonies retained its affiliation with the old feudal felony” (107).

The idea of keeping one’s words, one’s promises, one’s truth, was crucial to conceptions of treason. Green identifies four different kinds of “truth” during the Ricardian period: legal, ethical, theological, and intellectual (9). All of these could coincide, of course, in the same promises. But it is the legal and ethical senses of the word that matter the most in medieval conceptions of betrayal. Hornsby argues that for Chaucer “the fundamental force binding any agreement, moral or legal, is the bond of ‘trouthe.’ Through the keeping of ‘trouthe,’ one honors and fulfills the expectation that motivates anyone entering into any sort of relationship with another” (104).²¹ Within the poem, he argues, it is Criseyde’s claims that she speaks her truth, that she gives Troilus her truth, that she is true, that seem to place her in the ultimate role of betrayer, of traitor, when she ultimately does not return to him and seems to give her love to Diomedes instead. Turner claims that “With its emphasis on the way that personal division and sexual deviancy lead to political dissent, and on the connections between political traitors (Antenor, Calchas) and a personal traitor (Criseyde), *Troilus and Criseyde* also draws

²¹ Hornsby argues that this ideal holds in canon law of the time, too, which “provides evidence that oral contracts cemented by the pledge of ‘trouthe’ carried a considerable amount of legal force in Chaucer’s day” and that

Promises were both morally and spiritually binding when based upon a pledge of ‘trouthe.’ What bound the promise according to canon law, though, were not just the ritualistic trappings appended to the promise but the promisor’s ‘entente’—the motive lurking beneath the formality of pledging ‘trouthe.’ The connection or rift between promises sealed with pledges of ‘trouthe’ and the actual entente in making the promise gives an indication of a person’s spiritual condition (45).

heavily on the differing conceptions of treason available at this time” (244). She views these links as reinforcing each other: as Calchas is a political traitor, so Criseyde is a personal traitor.

However, as I argue, the text consistently avoids making such easy connections, offering multiple and more complicated reasons for Criseyde’s behavior.

There is evidence that such mitigating factors would have been considered in the Middle Ages. Treason law had a wide impact on legal theory in late medieval England. As Green explains, treason was one of the first arenas in which the mental and emotional state of the accused might be taken into account:

Significantly, then, consideration of intention first achieves legal respectability in England with the development of the law of treason in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At a time when judges are still refusing to try the would-be felon’s thought...they are declaring themselves quite ready to try the traitor’s. (119)

He draws on Bellamy’s use of a 1441 decision in which it was decided that “if a man imagines the death of the king, and does nothing more, he shall be drawn, hung, and disemboweled” [*“si home ymagyn le mort de Roy et en fait pluys il serra traye et pend et disclos”*] (Bellamy 123; the translation is Green 119).²² This focus on intent could, of course, cut both ways. For the first time, people could be judged merely on what they thought (or were supposed to have thought), allowing a much broader scope of treason charges. On the other hand, intent could also work in one’s favor. Green notes that premeditation did not play as big a role in medieval legal theory as it does today, noting that neither England nor France gave their courts “any official authority to spare the killer

²² Bellamy cites *Year Book* 19 Henry VI (123, note 2).

who had acted involuntarily or under provocation; this was felt to be properly a matter for royal clemency alone” (133). At the same time, he suggests, there is proof that the degree to which an act was intentional or deliberate mattered:

English juries could, however, make sure that such clemency would be forthcoming by certifying that the killer had done everything possible to avoid fighting, had struck the fatal blow only when all avenues of escape had been closed, and preferably had made use of some simple

implement found lying to hand rather than employing a deadly weapon brought for the purpose. This they did with suspicious regularity. (133)

Clearly, he is referencing homicide here, not necessarily treason. But it is easy to see how the same logic might apply in reverse in cases of treason. If a person even thinks about betraying the king in some way, it is treason. But what if a person somehow commits treason without meaning to? Within the poem, as I will argue, Chaucer highlights the ways in which Criseyde tries to avoid making promises she cannot keep, faces dangers that Troilus does not consider, and puts off lying to him for as long as she can.

Treason in *Troilus and Criseyde*

There is plenty of betrayal to go around in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The most striking example is that of Calkas’s treason; its clarity, in fact, works as a foil against the more complex and ambiguous case of Criseyde’s. Chaucer shows how Criseyde both is and is not like her treacherous father. The first act of treason we see in the poem is Calkas deserting Troy for Greece, using his secret knowledge of his city’s fall against it, and saving himself in the process. This first act of betrayal in the poem is presented as hasty but clearly premeditated, deliberate. Calkas is “a lord of gret auctorite, / A gret

devyn" (1.65-66) who knows through his "science" (1.67) that Troy will fall. Instead of warning the city, Calkas keeps this knowledge to himself, a secret, and sneaks over to the Greeks: "For which for to departen softely / Took purpose ful this forknowynge wise, / And to the Grekes oost ful pryvely / He stal anon" (1.78-81). He steals away as quickly and quietly as he can, much like the romantic traitors in Chaucer's next poem, *The Legend of Good Women*. In terms of medieval treason law, what is important here is both the secrecy and the thinking that goes into the plan. He does this on "purpose" and with full knowledge of what will happen to Troy; he "Knew wel" (1.68) and "wel wiste" (1.76) that the city is going to fall. Early in the poem, then, this sets up a contrast to Criseyde's behavior; as we will see, Criseyde never seems to know anything for sure and so can hardly act with perfect foreknowledge. Calkas has a choice, and he chooses to go over to the enemy in a time of war, who receive him "in curteys wise" (1.81). He helps the enemy army, treason in any age.

The town's reaction makes clear just how serious the offense is. The once "gret auctorite" is now "Calkas traitor" (1.87) to them, and they swear a brutal and total revenge, not only on the criminal himself, but his family, too. They "casten to be wroken / On hym that falsly hadde his faith so broken, / And seyden he and al his kyn at-ones / Ben worthi for to brennen, fel and bones" (1.88-91). Medieval treason laws allowed for the children of traitors to be punished, even if they were in no way implicated in the crime (Bellamy 13). For one thing, the lands and wealth of convicted traitors would escheat to the king, leaving wives and children dependent on his mercy to provide for them. In France, the children of convicted traitors could be killed. Bellamy explains that

“The argument was that the crime of treason was so horrible that the traitor’s offspring were contaminated by this misdeed and ought to be destroyed with him;” he also notes that daughters were sometimes spared (13). English law does not seem to go this far; Bracton’s thirteenth-century legal treatise states that “The crime or punishment can impose no stigma on the son” (299).²³ However, the fact that such a statement must be made in the first place indicates that there must have been a desire for such vicarious punishment. In the poem, it makes a vicious sense that the people of Troy, unable to punish Calkas after he has escaped, would turn their anger towards the nearest relative on whom they could get their hands: Criseyde. It also, of course, reflects the fact that women in general often suffer violence, particularly during wartime, as substitutes for enemies who are either more powerful or simply absent.²⁴ Criseyde must plead to Hector for protection. Calkas’s behavior, thus, sets up the context for betrayal in the poem: knowledge, secrecy, and deliberate action. Criseyde’s later betrayal is in sharp relief.

Calkas, nonetheless, is not the only named traitor in the poem. Men in general are accused of treason in love more than once in the poem. Criseyde herself points out that although women are often accused of faithlessness, it is men who often perpetrate the wrong. Pondering the consequences of a public affair with Troilus, she muses that “Also thise wikked tonges ben so prest / To speke us [women] harm; ek men ben so untrew, /

²³ See Henry de Bracton. *De Legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae. On the Laws and Customs of England*. Ed. George E. Woodbine. Trans. Samuel E. Thorne. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.

²⁴ I do not wish to imply that men never suffer the same kinds of violence—physical, sexual, or emotional—whether during wartime or not. This is obviously not the case, as recent accounts of the abuses suffered by political prisoners in Iran, to take a well-publicized example, and around the world show. However, historically, women have tended to bear the brunt of sexual violence, at home and during times of conflict.

That right anon as cessed is hire lest, / So cesseth love, and forth to love a newe” (2.785-788). It is men, she argues, who dispose of lovers as soon as the fire has cooled, men who move easily from one partner to the next, men who are “untrew.” Criseyde takes this characterization a step further, complaining “How ofte tyme hath it yknowen be / The tresoun that to wommen hath ben do!” (2.792-3). There is deep irony here, of course: it is Criseyde who betrays Troilus in the poem, yet here she accuses men of the same crime, specifically naming it as “tresoun.”

Moreover, the narrator ends the poem by reminding the audience that although this particular story illustrates the opposite, countless examples exist of men betraying women. He has written the poem not just for men, “But moost for wommen that bitraised be / Thorough false folk—God yeve hem sorwe, amen!— / That with hire grete wit and subtilte / Bytraise yow” (5.1780-83). Even here, the treachery takes the form of “grete wit and subtilte,” or knowledge, cunning, and secrecy. As Jill Mann notes, this refocusing on male treachery is important; she points out that both here and in “The Manciple’s Tale,” where the stories concern women betraying men, Chaucer takes time to implicate men, too. However, as she points out, “There are no such contradictory frameworks to complicate his stories of male betrayal (16-17). Thus, the poem’s first and last explicit mentions of romantic treason place it in the context of men betraying women, a commonplace that is often eclipsed by the ease with which Criseyde takes her place as *the* betrayer in the poem.

If Calkas demonstrates clear political treason, and men in general are charged with clear romantic treason, Pandarus’s behavior throughout the poem reminds the reader

of the broader spectrum of treason. He constantly deceives Criseyde, manipulating her to his own ends and without regard to her wishes or well-being. As her uncle, Pandarus owes her loyalty and protection; however, even he knows that his machinations are neither loyal nor protective.²⁵ In Book Three, Pandarus has a pang of doubt and worries that he will be seen as a traitor for leading Criseyde into the affair. But he will not even say the word, initially: “Al sey I nought, thow wost wel what I meene” (3.256). A few lines later, though, he spells it out, “wo” to think that he is “hire em, and traitour ek yfeere” (3.270, 273). Pandarus has been busily plotting, prodding, and teasing his niece into accepting a relationship with Troilus; like Calkas, he has knowledge of a broader context, and he works secretly to bring his plan to bear.

Unlike Calkas, he worries what people would think: “Whi, al the world upon it woulde crie, / And seyn that I the werste trecherie / Dide in this case, that evere was bigonne” (3.277-279).²⁶ Pandarus, at least, seems to define treason and treachery in terms of deliberate lying and manipulating, using his position of authority to lead Criseyde into the role of his choice. In fact, Pandarus does most of the lying in the poem. When he invites Criseyde over for dinner, she specifically asks if Troilus will be there, and Pandarus specifically says no—he lies.²⁷ Pandarus has reason to worry about being considered a traitor; he knows what the typical punishment for treason is. When he

²⁵ Hansen wryly notes that he is as deceptive as any woman could be thought (165).

²⁶ Dinshaw argues: “His perfect willingness to engage in this activity *and* his reluctance to have it known suggest both that he views women as things to be traded and that this is an operant truth that Trojans (especially those ostensibly courtly lovers) would perhaps rather not acknowledge” (58).

²⁷ But the Narrator complicates this: “Nought list myn auctour fully to declare / What that she thoughte whan he side so, / That Troilus was out of towne yfare, / As if he seyde therof soth or no,” but, “as his nece, obeyed as hire oughte” (3.575-578; 3. 581).

finally convinces Troilus to confide in him, he swears by the penalty traditionally associated with treason: “And have my trouthe, but thow it fynde so / I be thi boote, er that it be ful longe, / To pieces do me drawe and sithen honge!” (831-833).²⁸ Drawing was the punishment reserved for treason throughout the Middle Ages. Here we see a deliberate link between the legal context of betrayal, treason, and interpersonal connections, though in friendship, not romance.

Criseyde is not the only woman accused of betrayal in the poem. Many critics have seen a link between Criseyde and Lady Fortune.²⁹ However, I would argue that the connection is far more tenuous than it may seem. As he does with Calkas, Chaucer presents an unstable parallel between Criseyde and Fortune. Fortune is the first female traitor so named in the poem. In the proem to Book Four, when the lovers’ world starts to collapse, the Narrator lashes out at Fortune, who “semeth trewest whan she wol bygyle / And kan to fooles so hire song entune / That she hem hent and blent, traitour commune!” (4.3-5). This is some of the most vulgar language in the poem; a common³⁰ woman is a whore, available to any man, shared. Cox points out that “The conflation of Fortune and Woman is manifest most tellingly in the ‘traitor comune’ label” (46).³¹

²⁸ This awareness separates Pandarus from most of the male traitors, as I will show in the following chapter.

²⁹ E. Talbot Donaldson, in *Speaking of Chaucer*, for example, claims: “the distinction between the two women, Fortune and Criseide, tends to blur, and the goddess’s fickleness rubs off on the mortal lady” (69).

³⁰ In Book One, Pandarus explains that Fortune “is commune / To everi manere wight in some degree” (1.843-44). “Commune” as used here, without the “traitor” label attached, is less pointed; it carries the sense of universal; no one, no matter his or her “degree,” can escape Fortune.

³¹ Henryson takes this comparison one step further in his *Testament of Cresseid*, placing her in a leper colony as a common woman; this is, of course, the fate with which Mark threatens Iseut in Bérroul’s *Tristan and Iseut*.

Fortune frustrates men by teasing them, allowing them a bit of happiness before yanking it away; this is, according to medieval stereotypes, feminine behavior. Here, the most important aspect of Fortune is her deception, her facility with performance. Fortune not only deceives, but does so purposefully, “whan she wol bygyle.” This is where the comparison to Criseyde becomes strained, however; as I will argue, except for in the very last letter she sends to Troilus, Criseyde is never shown to be actively performing, or deceiving, in any way.³²

Fortune is also described as ontologically unstable, change itself: “For if hire whiel stynte any thyng to torne, / Than cessed she Fortune anon to be” (1.848-9). As Fortune is female, the equation of incessant, necessary change with her very identity would seem to be misogynist. In a way, it also links her to Criseyde, whose ultimate moniker is “slydyng of corage.” However, it is not just Criseyde who is “slydyng;” Chaucer goes to great lengths to show the degree to which her situations themselves change. Thus, even while he highlights this link, with both females not just representing but embodying change itself, Chaucer sets up a distinction between them.³³ Within the poem, Criseyde is never described or seen to be trying to beguile anyone. As I have suggested, Chaucer goes out of his way to show that her actions are never deliberately deceptive. As he does with Calkas, Chaucer uses what could be the most damning

³² In fact, Priscilla Martin argues vehemently that Criseyde is *not* like a stereotypical woman: she notes that while Criseyde is consistently explained in terms of her gender, linked to the idea of “womanly noblesse” throughout the poem (287), at the same time, “Chaucer’s Criseyde does not share the faults and foibles attributed to women by the clerks and satirists. She is not vain, flirtatious, garrulous or indiscreet” (162).

³³ If anything, a comparison with Fame may be more apt: “The swifte Fame, which that false thynges / Egal reporteth lik the thynges trewe” (4.659-660). This is more akin to Criseyde’s behavior, as I will show.

examples of parallel treachery to highlight the ways in which Criseyde's situation and behavior is different.

Though neither is named as explicitly as the previous three, there are two other betrayals³⁴ in the poem to consider. In Book Four, the city of Troy decides to exchange Criseyde for Trojans being held by the Greeks; as Carl Grey Martin points out, "this is the book in which Criseyde herself is betrayed" (228).³⁵ Although Hector objects to trading her to the Greeks, claiming that she is not a prisoner (4.179) and so to exchange her does not make sense, the people of Troy, presumably the same people who were so intent on burning Calkas's property and family in the first place, decide to send Criseyde away. Hector's protest that "We usen here no wommen for to selle" (4.182) falls on deaf ears. As Dinshaw wryly notes, "The Trojans may not approve of commercialized traffic in women...but they clearly understand that a woman is man's possession and can be traded" (61). The people beg Priam to get Antenor back, and the language is telling: "aloure vois is to forgon Criseyde" (4.195). They force Hector to renege on his promise to Criseyde with a unanimous, deliberate, and ultimately ironic choice. It is, of course, Antenor who (with Aeneas) will betray Troy, as the Narrator points out in the next stanza: "For he was after traitour to the town / Of Troye" (4.204-205). The exchange is thus a bad idea all around; more importantly, though, it highlights the insidious nature of treason and betrayal while at the same time suggesting that there are different degrees and levels of both. Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus will break his heart and his spirit, but it is

³⁴ Three, if you count the fact that Troilus and Criseyde call night "traitour" (3.1700).

³⁵ See his "Bitraised Thorough False Folk": Criseyde, the Siege, and the Threat of Treason." *Chaucer Review* 37.3 (2003): 219-233.

in part a result of the people's decision here. Moreover, it is Antenor and Aeneas's betrayal of Troy which brings down the city once and for all.

Many critics see Troilus's inaction as a form of betrayal in itself, too. Cox points out that "while Criseyde's professed fidelity to Troilus is compromised once she belongs to the Greeks, it is Troilus who betrays Criseyde first," being "wholly ineffectual and passive" after her trade has been finalized (47). Troilus has earlier promised to help her, but he does nothing upon hearing of the proposed trade.³⁶ This will be examined more fully later; it is enough to note that when they discuss the terms of their relationship in Book Three, she agrees to "Receyven hym fully to my servyse," (3.161) and requires that he will "*my honoure with wit and bisynesse / Ay kepe*" (3.165-166; italics mine). Troilus, however, seems incapable of using either to solve the dilemma. This is framed within the poem as masculine behavior. When he hears about the request to exchange his beloved, his body reacts: his face changes (4.150), but he says and does nothing else: "Lest men sholde his affeccion espye; / With mannes herte he gan his sorwes drye, / And ful of angwissh and of grisly drede / Abod what lordes wolde unto it seye" (4.153-156). His passivity is marked as manliness here; he is acting as a man should *for* an audience of men.³⁷ But this stoicism proves devastating. Troilus, though not named as a traitor, and

³⁶ John Ganim points out in his *Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative* that Troilus's main reason for not simply grabbing her right away is that he wants to hear what she wants to do, "to abide by the rules of courtly love and wait for her decision;" as he notes, though, this idea "seems to rest on the fiction that she really has any choice" (96).

³⁷ Moreover, Troilus is not above lying, "so wel dissimilen he koude" (3. 434) to hide his emotion. Martin argues that the Narrator has no problem telling when Troilus is lying but never quite pins Criseyde down (164).

though not explicitly blamed for it throughout the poem, bears some responsibility for Criseyde leaving, if not her actions after she has left.

Both the action of the Trojan people and the inaction of Troilus add a layer of complexity to Criseyde's decision to stay with the Greeks, making it more difficult to define the betrayal. After the exchange is approved, Troilus lies on his bed bemoaning "the chaungynge of Criseyde" (4.231). He will not fight the decision—he fears he "sholde han also blame of every wight" for abducting yet another woman (4.551), and one that "is changed for the townes good" (4.553). But this idea of Criseyde's "chaungynge" is crucial. As Carl Grey Martin points out, "the parliament's decision to trade her as if she were a prisoner of war is to make her a Greek—a foreigner instead of a 'citizen,' negating Hector's earlier affirmation of her belonging within the city walls and effectively collapsing the difference between Trojans and Greeks just as Calcas's emigration had done" (228). She has not just been exchanged, but changed, fundamentally. If Troy decides that she is no longer Trojan, what does that mean for her relationship with Troilus? Would returning to him be an act of treason against the Greeks? As I will argue, this uncertainty, her liminal status, plays a huge role in why she does not attempt to get back to Troy and Troilus.

Criseyde

By the end of the poem, Criseyde is convinced that she will be forever fixed as the symbol of female treachery, of feminine fickleness. Her reputation in literature and criticism would seem to bear this out. But with the wave of feminist criticism that occurred at the end of the twentieth century, more attention has been paid to figuring out

exactly what Criseyde does to deserve this role. Cox wonders, “But what, then, we might ask, actually constitutes Criseyde’s betrayal?” (48). As I have argued, Chaucer paints a fairly clear picture of what treason means in this poem, sometimes drawing on current legal and punishment theories, and sometimes drawing on older, more popular ideas of what it means to betray a mutual trust. The traitors in the poem know more than they tell, act on that information deliberately, and use it to maintain or gain power. Within the poem, there are a few lines of evidence which would seem to indict Criseyde: the Narrator’s words, his interpretation of events and gift exchanges, and her own words and thoughts, oaths and letters. An examination of Book Five will detail what she does, when she does it, and perhaps more importantly, why she does it. But first, I want to look at the threads Chaucer runs through the poem before she gets to that point; what appears is that she is not deceptive until the very end, and does not deliberately betray Troilus until, perhaps, that final letter. Moreover, we will see that when she does do it, it is not for the easily accessible reasons (heredity and gender) but because of the situations which these have created.

Like father, like daughter?

The first way in which Chaucer complicates the picture of the “guilty party” is, in fact, by starting the poem with the discussion of Calkas. This may seem counterintuitive; it can easily be argued that Chaucer uses this connection to underscore Criseyde’s betrayal of Troilus, a dubious beginning for a heroine. On the one hand, focusing on Criseyde’s treacherous father taints Criseyde, suggesting an easy parallel between the two: like father, like daughter. On the other hand, it paints a straightforward picture of

treachery that is nothing like Criseyde's. In fact, the Narrator explains that Criseyde, "Al unwist of this false and wikked dede" (1.93), was not involved in Calkas's scheme in any way. More importantly, starting with Calkas's betrayal changes the way the reader understands Criseyde because she is endangered by it; she is one of the kin whom the people want to punish in his stead. As Cox argues, "Though framed as the transgressor, Criseyde is introduced in the narrative proper as having been subjected to prior misfortunes with rather dire consequences, continuing into the narrative present" (41).³⁸ She begins the poem as a pawn in a city torn by the exchange of women, constantly and deeply affected by the decisions of the men around her. Criseyde begins almost simultaneously as both the betrayer and the betrayed. Indeed, her father's treason puts her in several precarious positions: as a Trojan, especially a Trojan woman, who would be in particular peril when Troy fell, and as his daughter.

She is very aware of her own uncertain situation: she "alday herd at ere / Hire fadres shame, his falsnesse and tresoun, / Wel neigh out of hir wit for sorwe and fere" (1.106-108).³⁹ Her initial connection to "falsnesse and tresoun" is that she is a victim of it. Chaucer is at pains to show that Criseyde is in very real danger: "For of hire life she was ful sore in drede, / As she that nyste what was best to rede; / For bothe a widewe was she and alone / Of any frend to whom she dorste hir mone" (1.95-98). As Hallissy points out, "Chaucer's audience would have seen Criseyde's fears as well grounded. All women are more vulnerable in wartime than at other times, and widows are most

³⁸ Priscilla Martin also notes that "Criseyde enters the poem as a potential casualty of the siege" (157).

³⁹ This comes right after a passage on her beauty; Chaucer is perhaps adding a layer to her danger by connecting her beauty with her inability to protect herself. The Trojan War started, of course, as a result of the abduction of a beautiful woman.

vulnerable of all” (146). This is almost exactly how Criseyde will start in Book Five, too. She is scared that she will be killed; she has no husband and now no father to protect her. It would be easy to see in this the start of a cycle from victim to perpetrator.

But Chaucer’s focus is not on highlighting this link; he does not throw in asides to remind the reader here of Criseyde’s later betrayal. Instead, he uses it to emphasize Criseyde’s helplessness and fear. She must beg Hector for help, and his words are key to the argument that Chaucer does not taint Criseyde with treason before due time. Hector tells her simply to “Lat youre fadres treson gon / Forth with meschaunce, and ye yourself in joie / Dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie” (117-119). Here, the same term used for Calkas (“fadres treson”) works at once to highlight and sever the familial connection. For the poem itself seems to let Calkas, his treason, and his relationship to Criseyde “gon” for quite a while. As Sylvia Federico points out, “The poem thus enacts Hector’s order of forgiveness, creating a time and space in which Criseyde can be something other than the traitorous daughter of a traitor” (77).⁴⁰ We hear nothing of Calkas until book four of the poem.

A brief detour to examine how John Lydgate handles the Calkas-Criseyde relationship in his fifteenth-century *Troy Book* will show just how remarkable Chaucer’s treatment is.⁴¹ Lydgate is, of course, attempting to present the full story of Troy, drawing explicitly on Guido, a source in which, as C. David Benson points out, “treason and

⁴⁰ See her *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire Building in the Late Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

⁴¹ All references to Lydgate are to *Troy Book: Selections*. Ed. Robert R. Edwards. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998.

treachery” become “standard behavior” by the end (30). At the same time, Lydgate also had Chaucer for a source, and could have followed his example of trying to distance Criseyde from her traitorous father. However, even within the swirling layers of deceit and betrayal in the poem, Lydgate paints a striking picture of the father-daughter duo. Calchas here is the absolute worst sort of traitor. Simple burning is not good enough punishment; Lydgate’s Trojans think Calchas is:

Worthi to ben enhonged be the halse
For his tresoun and his doublenes.
And, overemore, thei seiden eke expresse
That he disserved hath be right of lawe
Shamfully firste for to be drawe
[...]
Liche a traytour in as dispitous wyse
As any herte can thence or devyse,
Everyche affermynge as by jugement
That deth was noon ffully equipollent
To his deserte nor to his falseness. (3.3722-26; 3729-33)

I quote this at length to demonstrate the enhanced perception of Calchas’s treachery. They want him drawn and hanged, the typical medieval punishment for treason. Calchas is found guilty of active deception here, “doublenes,” and “falseness,” betraying the Trojans repeatedly.⁴² His treason seems inherent, innate.

Criseyde’s betrayal of Troilus is also far clearer in the *Troy Book*, and of a different kind. Since the narration moves backwards, starting with the separation of the lovers first, her duplicitous sorrow at the parting, her conscious deception, is highlighted.

⁴² He betrays the Trojans several times, first by deserting to the Greeks, and then by engineering the death of the innocent Polyxena.

Lydgate himself, blaming Guido as he writes, seems to revel in describing her deliberate deception of Troilus:

Hir teris and hir compleynyng,
Hir wordis white, softe, and blaundyshyng,
Wer meynte with feynyng and with flaterie
And outward farsed with many a fals lye;
For under hid was al the variaunce,
Cured above with feyned contenance,
As wommen kan fasly teris borwe. (3.4270-77)

She is faking from the start, performing the part of the miserable lover and manipulating her outward appearance; as I argue, there is nothing in Chaucer's poem to suggest that Criseyde is deceiving Troilus until the absolute end of the poem. Here, rather than intending to be true, Lydgate's Criseyde "meynte with feynyng" to conceal her true feelings from the beginning.⁴³ The fact that she plays the same game with Diomedes upon arriving at the Greek camp works to confirm her innate treachery. She works on him "konnyngly and in ful sleighty wyse" (3.4839). This is a fully self-aware Criseyde, playing the angles and seeming to enjoy doing so. Chaucer's Criseyde may be "slydyng," but Lydgate's Criseyde is "sleighty."

Lydgate echoes this description in his treatment of Calchas, presenting Calchas and Criseyde as two of a kind. Chaucer's essentialized Calchas is almost nothing like his complicated Criseyde. Lydgate goes out of his way, however, to demonstrate the parallels between his father-daughter duo. After yet another example of Calchas's perfidy, which results in the death of the Trojan princess Polyxena, Lydgate describes

⁴³ For Lydgate, again blaming Guido, this is par for the course for women: "Ther is no fraude fully equipollent / To the fraude and sleighty compassing / Of a womman" (3.4332-4).

Calchas as “This sleighty serpent, fader and patroun/ And fynder-up of tresoun and of gyle” (4.6042-3). Calchas, here, is not just a “sleighty” traitor who happens to have a “sleighty” traitor for a daughter, but he is the “fader and patroun” of “tresoun and of gyle.” In fact, this passage suggests that even if there were no treason there to begin with, Calchas could and would dig some up, find it and found it, establish it as a tradition to be followed. In the *Troy Book*, his daughter does just that, transferring her performance of romantic deception from Troy to Greece, following in her father’s “sleighty” footsteps.⁴⁴ There is nothing in Lydgate’s poem to distance Criseyde from her father, none of the “space” Sylvia Federico points out in Chaucer’s poem, none of the careful delineation of different behaviors and circumstances.

⁴⁴ *The Troy Book* is an intriguing poem in many ways, particularly in its slightly odd relationship to its patron. Henry IV had it commissioned for his son, the Prince of Wales. In *England’s Empty Throne*, among other works, Paul Strohm has demonstrated the repeated Lancastrian attempts to stamp out all forms of treason, including heresy and counterfeiting. Dealing with treason severely was meant to be a sign of commitment to orthodoxy and legitimacy: a clear opposition to Richard II’s troubled reign. Lydgate’s poem, therefore, dedicated to the future Henry V, seems to fit into the Lancastrian propaganda machine by condemning traitors accordingly.

However, as I have argued, the poem also emphasizes heritable treason, a dangerous idea for a poet whose commission is from the son of a king who has usurped the throne. Lydgate’s poem frames itself in the discourse of legitimate royal descent and inheritance. The Prologue states that the work is for the Prince of Wales, who is “Lyche his fader of maneris and of name” (100), and “To whom schal longe by successioun / For to governe Brutys Albyoun” (103-4). Lydgate repeats these sentiments in the Envoy, describing the Prince as “born also by discent of lyne / As rightful eyr by title to atteyne” (5-6). Henry V’s ascension is supposed to return to the “normal” way of crowning a king, through inheritance. But of course the inherited crown is already problematized by the usurpation. Henry IV had continually to battle the taint of treason himself. Any comparison of the Prince to his father, then, is inherently problematic. Sylvia Federico thus claims that “*The Troy Book* can in no way be seen as a successfully or even consistent Lancastrian poem” (128). However, Strohm points to that very inconsistency as a hallmark of Lancastrian poems. He points out that they “cannot help introducing via subordination or negation or passing illustration the very ideas that dare not be acknowledged” (146). Constrictions of time and space, along with my focus in this section on representations of treason and gender during Richard’s reign, unfortunately prevent a larger discussion of the poem here.

“ful sleighly for to pleie”

Another way in which Chaucer problematizes any simple condemnation of Criseyde is his emphasis on Criseyde’s uncomfortably sharp awareness of her own situation. My understanding of Criseyde draws on the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, who argues that Criseyde “reads like a woman;” that is, she considers her surroundings carefully, hyperaware of the various ways in which things may be interpreted, by herself and others. Dinshaw notes that Criseyde is consistently depicted as carefully considering context, whether while reading Troilus’s letters or listening to one of her ladies read Antigone’s song; as a woman, she argues, Criseyde “keeps the whole in view—every word of it” (55). Her gendered position, Dinshaw argues, requires such awareness, and it factors into her most fateful decisions: to accept Troilus, to accept her trade to the Greeks, and ultimately to accept her place there. Criseyde knows that she has to behave carefully. Emphasizing Criseyde’s status not just as a woman but as a widow, Hallissy points out that late medieval England had both high expectations of and rampant negative stereotypes about widows (135-141). Criseyde is always conscious of her standing in this regard, too. When Pandarus suggests that she loosen up and dance with him, she wonders: “Be ye mad? / Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save? / By God, ye maken me right soore adrad!” (1.113-115). Chaucer shows us a Criseyde who is always aware of how she ought to behave, and constantly considering her options.

At the same time, she has a shrewd understanding of Pandarus and his role in the affair. She tells Pandarus that if it had been her own idea to fall in love with Troilus (or Achilles or Hector or anyone) “Ye nolde han had no mercy ne mesure / On me, but alwey

had me in repreve” (2.418-419). Throughout the poem, Criseyde balances her own wishes and how her actions will appear to others. When faced with the possibility of Troilus dying for love of her, her thoughts go to how it would look to others: “What men wolde of hit deme I kan nat seye; / It nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie” (2.461-2).⁴⁵ The language here is telling; she is a woman in a world run by men, and thus it matters intensely “what men wolde of hit deme.” She knows she has to be on her guard, “pleie” the situation “ful sleighly.” “Sleighly” often has negative connotations, even today, and Hallissy sees her thought process as slightly sinister: “Criseyde’s careful reasoning process shows her to be calculating, self-concerned, and amoral” (149). However, Hallissy’s harsh characterization does not fit with the way Chaucer actually portrays Criseyde—to be “careful,” “calculating,” and “self-concerned” is not necessarily to be “amoral.” Here, Criseyde is clearly not thinking merely in terms of manipulation but self-preservation. Everything must be considered, weighed for not just possible benefits but dangers. Her pragmatism is shown throughout the poem: “Of harmes two, the lesse is for to chese” (2.470). This pragmatism is based also on a keen awareness of context. She sees things in degrees. When she considers the idea that Troilus might be jealous, she points out that “certeyn is, som manere jalousie / Is excusable more than som, iwys” (3.1030-31). Context matters intensely to Criseyde, and this is what makes the process of her ultimate betrayal so difficult to chart. Her contexts keep shifting, and there is never much she can do about it.

⁴⁵ Criseyde considers Troilus partly because he is praised “Of hem that me were levest preyed be” (2.189).

Such pragmatism precludes the luxury of being impulsive. Criseyde cannot accept *any* suitor on a whim, not even Troilus, a prince of the city. Mann, in fact, argues that an examination of Criseyde's acceptance of Troilus is crucial to understanding her later behavior (19). It takes three books before she declares her love for Troilus. Unlike Fortune, she does not change swiftly. As Priscilla Martin points out, "She is slow to accept Troilus's love" (162). The Narrator even explains carefully that

For I sey nought that she so sodeynly
Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne
To like hym first, and I have told yow whi;
And after that, his manhood and his pyne
Made love withinne hire for to myne,
For which by process and by good servyse
He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse. (2.673-679)

He points out that she considers both Troilus and herself carefully, moving from friendship to love "in no sodeyn wyse." Unlike men, who "right anon" change their hearts, Criseyde does not change "sodeynly." Troilus has to earn her love, "by process and by good servyse." Martin notes that this is one more example of how "The stereotype of the lustful woman scarcely fits this nervous and temporizing heroine" (171), pointing out further that it is Troilus who falls in love at first sight, "but it did not occur to the narrator that this required defending" (171).⁴⁶ The narrator thus mirrors Criseyde's own concern with deliberation and caution.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Campbell also discusses this "by way of gendered contrast," noting that "the narrator is always able to represent Troilus, even when he lies to and deceives Criseyde" (343). She sees this in terms of what she calls "integrity," which is "the wholeness that comes from being fully representable," and which, she argues Troilus has "even when he lacks moral integrity" (343). See her "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente': Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer's Use of History." *Chaucer Review* 27.4 (1993): 342-358.

“right as she mente”

In examining Criseyde’s behavior for evidence of betrayal, the complicated way in which Criseyde phrases her speech and the Narrator explains her thoughts is crucial. Part of the sympathy Chaucer builds for his heroine stems from her repeated efforts to avoid lying or seeming deceptive. Her promises to Troilus are careful but clear throughout most of the poem, reflecting her understanding of her precarious position. Indeed, from the start she makes it clear that her actions and affections are subject to her own sense of honor and emotion; she will not lead him on, or love him if she truly cannot, but, always with the condition that her honor is safe, she will be pleasant, and she will try to help him:

But that I nyl nat holden hym in honde,
Ne love a man ne kan I naught ne may
Ayeins my wyl, but elles wol I fonde,
Myn honour sauf, plese hym fro day to day. (2.477-80)

This is a telling set of promises; the elements on which she focuses—her own honesty, her reputation, her behavior—are all those which will come into doubt by the end of the poem. We see that she is trying to make her intention clear, to avoid making any kind of promise she will have to break. Not only does she not want to betray any promise, she does not want to be seen as a betrayer.

Even as she accepts Troilus in Book Three, she foregrounds both her reputation and intent:

*Myn honour sauf, I wol wel trewely,
And in swich forme as he gan now devyse,
Receyven hym fully to my servyse,*

Bysechyng hym, for Goddes love, that he
Wolde, in honour of trouthe and gentillesse,
As I wel mene, ek menen wel to me,
And myn honour with wit and bisynesse
Ay kepe; and if I may don hym gladnesse,
From hennesforth, iwys, *I nyl nought feyne,*
Now beth al hool; no lenger ye ne pleyne. (3.159-168; italics mine)

Again foregrounding “myn honour,” she promises to accept him within the terms of courtly love. She will accept him to her service, but only precisely as Troilus has explained it: “in swich forme as he gan now devyse.” At the same time, we see her highlight intent—what matters to her is not necessarily what people do, but what people mean. Moreover, she paints the relationship in terms of an impossible equality, “As I wel mene, ek menen wel to me,” which presumes that intent can be measured and reciprocated. Tellingly, though, these promises are grounded in conditionals; she will make him happy, but only “if” she “may” do so. This “if,” this idea that all these promises exist only in a specific context, is key to Chaucer’s presentation of Criseyde and her betrayal. Even after they have consummated their relationship, she pledges to be true to him in the same conditional way: “And I, emforth my connyng and my might, / Have and ay shal, how sore that me smerte, / Ben to yow trewe and hool with al myn herte” (3.999-1001). She offers to stay true no matter what pain it causes her, and it can be argued that she does not hold true to this promise; ultimately, when the danger is too great, she decides not to return to Troilus. But the “emforth” leaves some wiggle room; she will perform as best she can with her intelligence and power, both of which will be severely shaken at the end of the poem.

Chaucer continually manipulates these equivocal phrases to build tension by putting words in Criseyde's mouth that are literally true at the time being but will soon be proven false. He also makes it nearly impossible to point to specific promises that Criseyde breaks exactly. These oaths play a huge part in both Criseyde's characterization and in the complex portrayal of her guilt. Unlike Iseut, however, who equivocates with glee, Criseyde's equivocations seem serious and without ulterior motive. The Narrator gets a lot of mileage out of the word "yet." When Pandarus informs her that there are rumors, created by him, of course, floating around that she is seeing someone named Horaste, and that these are upsetting Troilus, she laments "Why hastow Troilus mad to me untriste, / That never yet agylte hym, that I wiste?" (3.839-840). Interestingly, we see Criseyde's specificity; in saying "that I wiste" she seems to imply the possibility that she has somehow betrayed him without knowing it herself. The "yet" also reminds the reader that she will "agylte" him, even if she herself does not know it at this point. Later in the same book, Criseyde makes the odd declaration to Troilus that she has not "yet" been unfaithful to him. She claims "Now God, thow woost, in thought ne dede untrew / To Troilus was nevere yet Criseyde" (3.1053-1054). Once again, Chaucer is playing with the presence of conflicting facts. This is both completely true—she has never been unfaithful to Troilus at this point—and unavoidably brings to mind the fact that she will.

However, she does also make promises that are less equivocal. As she declares her love, she promises: "Have here my trouth!"—and many an other oth" (3.1111). This giving of her "trouth" is problematic because, as noted earlier, to pledge one's word was

a serious undertaking in the Middle Ages. A few lines later she repeats this promise: “For I am thyn, by God and by my trouthe” (3.1512). Hornsby argues that this invocation of her “trouthe” indicates a binding promise: “by clothing the promise in a pledge of faith, Criseyde secures her promise with a formula that Chaucer’s audience would have recognized as important to the validity of a fourteenth-century agreement, a formula that created a moral and, according to canon law, a legal obligation” (43). These promises of truth are promises she will break, contributing to her betrayal. It is important to note, however, that she clearly does not make these promises intending to break them. In Book Three, she is in ecstasy, fantastically happy, and free from fear.

In Book Four, she continues to pledge herself, but the tone quickly shifts. When Troilus tries to persuade her to elope (4.1600-1601)—his one idea to prevent her from going—she charges that he does not trust her: “Mistrust me nought thus causeless, for routhe / Syn to be trewe I have yow plight my trouthe” (4.1609-1610). Once more, Chaucer plays with the timeline—at this point, such worry is “causeless,” but it will not be for long. There is clear evidence here that she has made a solemn promise to Troilus; to “plight [her] trouthe” is a serious thing.⁴⁷ However, unlike the oaths sworn in Book Three, here it is followed a few lines later by a more qualified promise: “And while that God my wit wol me conserve, / I shal so don, so trewe I have yow founde, / That ay honour to me-ward shal rebounde” (4.1664-1666). These promises, she suggests, are idealized; in a perfect world, in a world in which she is able to keep her head, she will be

⁴⁷ She worries that he will cheat on her: there would be no woman on earth “That so bitraised were or wogigon” as Criseyde, “that alle trouthe in yow entende” (4.1648-49).

true to him. This demonstrates, again, her suspicion that this idealized world itself may not hold. But this is not deceptive or beguiling, merely practical.

The clearly hyperbolic oaths she makes right before she leaves, oaths which contrast sharply with the careful, cautious promises she has been making throughout the poem, are also a point of evidence against her. These may seem, thus, like the clearest instances of broken promises. Even here in the most outrageous of promises, however, we still see the same ambiguity that makes pinning down a charge of betrayal so difficult. In it, she seems to swear that she will not stay with the Greeks for love or fear of Calkas or anyone else, or for any personal, material, or emotional gain. If she is false, she will damn herself to hell.

For thilke day that I for cherisyng
Or drede of fader, or for other wight,
Or for estat, delit, or for weddyng,
Be fals to yow, my Troilus, my knyght,
Saturnes doughter, Juno, thorough hire might,
As wood as Athamante do me dwelle
Eternaliche in Stix, the put of helle! (4.1534-1540)

Even here, though, there is wiggle room. It is not, essentially, for love or fear of one man that she stays; it is for fear of a whole army of men, of two whole armies of men, that she elects not to return to Troilus. There is no proof that she cherishes her father at all, nor is it even clear that she loves or cherishes Diomedes. She does not gain materially, or even emotionally; any sense of physical security she garners by staying with Diomedes seems to be balanced by equal amounts of pain and regret. We are never told that she marries Diomedes. In fact, we do not even see her happy in the Greek camp. She is not “fals” to Troilus for any of the specific reasons above.

She continues to swear hyperbolically, “on every god celestial” (4.1541), on a multitude of supernatural creatures: goddesses, nymphs, gods of hell, satyrs, fawns, and Atropos (4. 1542-46). In fact, she swears on unpleasant things here, creatures of sex, torment, and death, foreshadowing her fears in the Greek camp. Finally, she swears to the Symois River that he should go backwards the day she proves to be untrue. Criseyde’s plans will not work; she will forsake him, but nothing here suggests that Criseyde knows that. She swears to the river Symois:

That thilke day that ich untrew be
To Troilus, myn owene herte fre,
That thou retourne backward to thi welle,
And I with body and soule synke in helle! (4.1551-1554)

She makes a formal promise here, asking Symois to witness her oath (4.1548-1550). The language is equivocal, though—she does not say here that she will not be “untrew” to Troilus, simply that if she ever is, the river will run “backward,” that the world itself will be in confusion. She also notes that she herself will “synke in helle,” which is not a far cry from what happens to her name and honor. This is predictive, not restrictive.

The equivocations continue to make it very difficult to pinpoint any false oaths; the narrator’s phrasing of Criseyde’s thoughts is similarly ambiguous. In describing Criseyde’s reaction to her trade, the Narrator claims that she vows to be true to Troilus

As she that hadde hire herte and al hire mynde
On Troilus iset so wonder faste
That al this world ne myghte hire love unbynde,
Ne Troilus out of hire herte caste,
She wole ben his, while that hire lif may laste (4.673-677).

As Donaldson points out, the “As” here is puzzling—she does this ‘like’ someone would (78). Does this mean that she is only acting, pretending, as her literary predecessors are

shown to do? Or does it simply imply that she behaves just “as” anyone in her situation would, normally and without deception? As with many of her actions and speeches, this is open to multiple legitimate interpretations. In the proem to Book Four, the Narrator hedges again: “For how Criseyde Troilus forsook— / Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde— / Must hennesforth ben matere of my book” (4.15-17). He is specific and careful, like Criseyde, not overstating the matter. But this very act also makes her actions seem worse as it appears that the narrator himself is afraid to speak the truth. The betrayal is thus brought out and hidden simultaneously. The narrator seems to want us to believe that he believes Criseyde’s plan:

And troweliche, as writen wel I fynde,
That al this thyng was seyde of good entente,
And that hire herte trewe was and kynde
Towardes hym, and spak right as she mente,
And that she starf for wel neigh whan she wente,
And was in purpose evere to be trewe:
Thus writen they that of hire werkes knewe. (4.1415-1421)

The Narrator is muddying things. Guido, for example, takes the opportunity here to paint her as false, not true.⁴⁸ This is, therefore, a deliberate move on Chaucer’s part. He seems to parallel Criseyde’s concerns: intent and honesty, plus careful speech. It is her “purpose” that matters here. She is not planning to deceive him, beguile him.⁴⁹ There is no plan to betray.

⁴⁸ See note one above, *Historia* 19.159-160.

⁴⁹ It is difficult, in fact, to see what the point of lying would be at this moment—there is nothing to gain. Guido explains the deception in purely misogynist terms: “It is clearly implanted in all women by nature not to have any steady constancy; if one of their eyes weeps, the other smiles out of the corner, and their fickleness and changeableness always lead them to deceive men” (19.161-164). Chaucer avoids such overt explanations.

“in worse plit”

There is one other thread running throughout the poem that plays a vital role in Criseyde’s decisions once she reaches the Greek camp: the always present threat of rape. Her association with her father has placed her in danger, forcing her to seek protection from Hector, which he grants. But another look at what Hector promises is instructive; he vows to protect her, but reveals the double danger she is in. He swears that she will keep the honor she had before her father turned traitor (1.120-121) but also that her “body shal men save” (1.122). Cox argues that this is key; it “is an act of compassion, but one that nonetheless foregrounds her corporeal objectification, that is, her status as body rather than self” (40).⁵⁰ This seems a clear reference to the threat of burning mentioned earlier, but is also alludes to the further violence which might be done to a woman, particularly a woman with no protector. It foreshadows, too, the threat of rape which Criseyde will face as she enters the Greek camp. Ironically, her body is ultimately saved, but saved from a Trojan threat only to be delivered into a Greek one. The connection between her honor and her body is clear, and underscores why Criseyde is so keen to protect her reputation.⁵¹

As Louise O. Fradenburg argues in an important article, ““Our owen wo to drynke:’ Loss, Gender, and Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” the threat of rape is

⁵⁰ She further notes: “It introduces as well a pairing of promise and betrayal, one whose initiation and disintegration occur a step ahead of that involving Troilus and Criseyde; the two sets will intersect when the exchange for Antenor is made” (40).

⁵¹ Criseyde’s reputation is a high priority throughout the poem. Pandarus claims Criseyde has plenty “of good name and wisdom and manere” (1.880). He wants to keep it that way, warning Troilus to “se that thow, in special, / Requere naught that is ayeyns hyre name / For vertu streccheth naught himself to shame” (1.901-903). .

present throughout the poem. Fradenburg sees the poem as revealing the gendered basis for heroics and suffering; male recourse to violence allows heroism, she argues, whereas valorization for women comes only in suffering, often as a result of that same male violence (89). Criseyde, she argues, continually finds herself in danger, whether it is stated explicitly or not. Despite Hector's promise, her peril is not over once he offers her protection.⁵² We see that the war is taking its toll on her. In Book 2, when Pandarus comes to tell her the good news about Troilus's love for her, her first thought is that he has good news about the war: "is than th'assege aweye? / I am of Grekes so fered that I deye" (2.123-124).⁵³ Obviously any Trojan would be in danger from a conquering army, but women would face multiple levels of violence, physical and sexual.

Moreover, both Fradenburg and Hansen examine Chaucer's curious use in Book Two of the tale of Philomela, who is raped and mutilated by her sister Procne's husband. This is a tale he will tell in *The Legend of Good Women*. After a silenced Philomela has been able to convey her story to her sister through weaving, the sisters take revenge on the husband, Tereus, and are turned into birds: Philomela a nightingale, and Procne a

⁵² Fradenburg notes that this promise of protection is one more way in which the poem "occludes" scenes of possible violence: "The wish is, ultimately, for life, or to put it another way, for a life free of the threat of violence, but since the figure who grants this wish does so through his possession of a superior power of violence...the appeal is for a life figured as free of the threat of death, but only by gift of the other, and therefore not free at all" (104-105).

⁵³ She cites C.S. Lewis's description in *The Allegory of Love* of Criseyde's "ruling passion" of fear, which he argues produces "The pitiable longing, more childlike than womanly, for protection, for some strong and stable thing that will hide her away and take the burden from her shoulders" (185). Fradenburg argues that "To treat fear as a characterological matter where Criseyde is concerned is of course to fail to analyze the extent to which the question of violence done to Criseyde, and its role in the construction of her desires, is constantly both raised and occluded in *Troilus and Criseyde*" (98). While I am discussing Criseyde's fear as a primary motivating factor, my aim is to contextualize that fear in exactly the manner Fradenburg suggests.

swallow. In Book Two, the Narrator tells us that Pandarus wakes to the sound of the swallow, perhaps, as Hansen notes, suggesting a parallel between treacherous male relatives (158).⁵⁴ Criseyde, however, falls asleep to the sound of the nightingale right before she has the dream in which her heart is torn out painlessly by an eagle. Hansen argues that “This dream thus evokes and contains, like the poem as a whole, the sexual violence and mutilation that the myth of Procne and Philomela, the song of the swallow and the nightingale, brings to mind and then sets in contrast to Criseyde’s story” (160). She goes so far as to argue that Criseyde ultimately has less power than Procne or Philomela, who are at least allowed to enact revenge for the terrible rape and mutilation;⁵⁵ Criseyde can do nothing about her fate except fear it (158-159).

Several critics, including Fradenburg, Hansen, and Cox also suggest that Criseyde is familiar with the threat of rape because of the ambiguity of her first sexual encounter with Troilus. Cox argues that the consummation scene is not without a hint of forced sexual capitulation: “Consider, for instance, Troilus’s seductive invitation, ‘Now yeldeth yow, for other bote is non!’ ...which may be read as indicative of fantasy, rape-fantasy, or rape” (45).⁵⁶ Criseyde’s reaction is unhelpful, ambiguous: she replies “Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, / Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought here!” (3.1210-11).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Or, somewhat grotesquely, this would place Pandarus in the role of avenger, Procne.

⁵⁵ Fradenburg has a slightly different take on it: “Philomela, Procne, and Criseyde are all women who survive to tell their stories but whose voices are in various ways rendered inaudible or ambiguous” (100).

⁵⁶ See 3.1208.

⁵⁷ For the problems inherent in defining consent, both in the Middle Ages and the present day, see Christopher Cannon, “Chaucer and Rape,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 255-279. For an excellent

Thus, Mann sees this scene in a different way; she argues that “Just as she never formally decides to yield to Troilus, but comes to realize that she has yielded...so her betrayal too is a matter of retrospective acknowledgement... rather than a present decision” (23). But Hansen explains that this is problematic: “we can never determine exactly when—or even if—Criseyde ‘yielded,’ because her consent is a fiction, one that she is forced to invent, believe in, invoke, and revise at crucial points in order to save face and survive” (170).⁵⁸ To what extent Criseyde thinks she has a choice at all in the matter is ultimately unclear. As Fradenburg notes, “The consummation scene is written to produce an ambiguity that *cannot be resolved* through interpretation; we cannot ‘decide’ whether Criseyde has consented or not, whether she has been raped or not” (100). This question of “decidability” parallels, thus, the problems inherent in discussions of treason; investigations into both rape and treason involve exploring states of mind and individualized interpretations of circumstances and context. As Elizabeth Robertson asks, “how can what is private and inner be brought into the public arena?” (285).⁵⁹

Criseyde fears upsetting Troilus for many reasons; her reputation is in jeopardy, and her reputation is what is keeping her protected. If a liaison with Troilus ruins that,

study on disambiguating the medieval term *raptus*, which could mean both “abduction” and/or “rape,” see Caroline Dunn, “The Language of Ravishment in Medieval England.” *Speculum* 86:1. 79-116.

⁵⁸ Hansen is responding to A.C. Spearing’s interpretation of the scene on page 19 of his edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* (1976).

⁵⁹ In her article, “Public Bodies and Psychic Domains: Rape, Consent, and Female Subjectivity in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*,” she examines Criseyde situation as a possible victim of rape—both in terms of abduction and forced sexual intercourse—in terms of her relationship to Helen and Lucrece, who represent either form. Robertson ultimately argues that Criseyde falls into neither category, precisely, but represents the problems inherent in a society grappling with patriarchal ideals of women as property at the same time as granting women subjectivity in terms of consenting to their own marriages.

she might lose her protection. Even without the added peril of the city's anger against Calkas, what good could come of angering a prince of Troy?⁶⁰ Would Hector's protection go so far as to keep her safe from Troilus, his own brother? She thinks about what would happen if she tried to evade Troilus: "Peraunter he myghte have me in dispit, / Thorough whicch I myghte stonde in worse plit" (2.711-712). Her fear is not irrational; Pandarus uses her real danger to arrange the meeting at Deiophebus's house, telling him that "some men wolden don oppressioun,/ And wrongfully han hire possessioun" (2.1418-1419).⁶¹ This could, of course, refer to her house and physical possessions, but the object of "oppressioun" and "possessioun" could just as easily be Criseyde herself. Once the trade is approved, Criseyde is in a genuinely terrible position, and the threat of rape continues to haunt her in various ways. Even before she leaves, she tells Troilus that she does not want to stay in the Greek camp "Among tho men of armes evere in feere" (4.1363). The threat of rape, the knowledge that a woman's body and sexual choices are her own only insofar as the men around her deign to grant it, hovers over Criseyde throughout the poem.

⁶⁰ Hallissy misreads this: "in a habit of mind that prefigures her later betrayal of Troilus for Diomedes, she gives greatest weight to personal advantage" (150). There is also no evidence for her claim that: "she sees the loss of her husband as a gain to her in personal autonomy and contentment" (150).

⁶¹ Chaucer takes the opportunity to mention that Criseyde particularly worries about this charge because of "Antenor and Eneas, / That ben his frendes in swich manere cas" (2. 1474-75). Although he does not tell the full story here (or anywhere), it is these two men who bring about the final destruction of Troy.

“al be myn herte trew”

C. David Benson has protested that “Our distance from Criseyde’s heart and mind is especially pronounced during her betrayal of Troilus in Book 5” (“Opaque Text” 26).⁶² As I have tried to show, however, Chaucer has been laying out clues throughout the poem. Her fear of rape, for example, along with the other threads under discussion—her uncertain social standing, her pragmatism, her conditional promises—come together in Book Five to bring her to the point of betrayal. But a closer look at the chronology of the final section of the poem shows just how complex the process is. Initially, despite her fears, we see that she is still focused on her love for Troilus and her wish to get back to him. In her first talks with Diomedes, she is still thinking of Troilus. Hallissy argues that Criseyde “promptly betrays her lover” (152).⁶³ But there is no “promptly” about her decision to stay in the Greek camp, and there is certainly no “promptly” about her relationship with Diomedes. She accepts only “his frendshipe” (5.185), “in good manere” (5.186), and says she’ll “do fayn that is hym life and dere, / And tristen hym” (5.187-8). This is all; there is nothing objectionable here, nothing to suggest that she has a grand

⁶² He argues: “Although allusions to Criseyde’s psychology occur repeatedly in the poem, the exact nature of her inner self is kept from the reader” (18). He sees this as part of her allure: “It is precisely this deliberate and suggestive opaqueness that makes the English Criseyde so fascinating” (18). He later argues that “The understandable indignation of feminist readings of Criseyde does not, however, deny her triumph as a literary character. Chaucer is sensitive to the social marginality of women, but he uses that historical condition to create a heroine of extraordinary fictional power. Her silence and lack of self-assertion, reflecting the traditional political position of women, open an artistic space for readers to create their own Criseydes” (20). I see no reason for a split between the “understandable indignation of feminist readings” and “her triumph as a literary character.” Figuring Criseyde as an empty vessel, “an artistic space” in herself, however, mirrors medieval attitudes to women and textuality (see Dinshaw). See his “The Opaque Text of Chaucer’s Criseyde.” *Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde: ‘Subgit to alle Poesye’: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. R.A. Shoaf. Binghampton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992. 17-28.

⁶³ Hallissy again argues that as a widow, Criseyde should not be involved in any affair at all: “Once unfaithful to her late husband’s memory, Criseyde is now a second-time traitor” (152).

plan of betrayal in mind. Even after she has talked with Diomedes, she is still resolved to try to go back to Troy and Troilus.

However, once Criseyde has been there a few days, it becomes clear to her just how badly she has underestimated things: “In the Greek camp the difficulties and dangers of escape become real to her” (Priscilla Martin 184). Knowing that there are multiple repercussions to her choice to stay, she faces what the risks really involve should she attempt to leave; Priscilla Martin points out that even Troilus has ideas about going to the other side to retrieve her, but “rejects them as too dangerous” (184). She cannot convince her father to let her go (5.694-5), but she cannot renege on her promise to Troilus, either. Troilus will think that she does it deliberately, and she is smart enough to realize that this would be a reasonable conclusion. If Troilus does not care about her, no one will:

And if so be that I my terme pace,
My Troilus shal in his herte deme
That I am fals, and so it may wel seme:
Thus shal ich have unthouk on every side—
That I was born so weilaway the tide! (5.696-700)

But as recent critics have been more careful to point out, this fear of “unthouk on every side” is connected to and intensified by the fear of what it could lead to: rape. As Hallissy points out, “Criseyde knows, everyone knows, that the bodies of women are the spoils of war” (151).

Criseyde’s greatest fear is being caught on the trip back to Troy, on being thought a political spy or traitor:

And if that I me putte in jupartie
To stele away by nyght, and it bifalle
That I be kaught, I shal be holde a spie;
Or elles—lo, this drede I moost of alle—

If in the hondes of som wrecche I falle,
I nam but lost, al be myn herte trewe.
Now, mighty God, thow on my sorwe rewe! (5.696-707)

If she tries to leave, she knows that she cannot let herself be caught by either side. The Greeks are not her people; she does not know them, and she cannot expect to be treated well if she is caught while trying to flee her new captors. But the Trojans are also no longer her people; they wanted to let her go—they wanted Antenor instead—and she cannot expect that anyone but Troilus would be happy to see her back in Troy. As Robertson points out, “It is unclear...to which civic entity she belongs” (299). She is worried about her reputation here, too, but has even more pressing practical problems. If she is caught trying to reenter Troy, she will be thought a spy, probably by either side.⁶⁴

But even more devastating, and the aside is poignant, she could be captured by “som wrecche;” she could be raped. This would be devastating on many levels for her. It would be a violation of her physical, sexual, and psychic self, as rape of any kind always is. But it has another valence here, a particular relation to treason—Criseyde worries that this would constitute a betrayal of sorts.⁶⁵ She would be “lost, al be myn herte trewe.” Sex with another man, even forced sex, completely against her will, due to

⁶⁴ Turner points out that the usual villain in the story of Troy’s fall, Sinon, “is glaringly absent” from this poem (39). She notes that “Despite the fact that Sinon is a Greek, and a loyal Greek, many Chaucerian references emphasize his treachery...Sinon can be classified as a partial insider, and therefore as a traitor, but he also remains a foreigner, unassimilated to the system” (40, n.33). This status, “a partial insider,” surely also describes Criseyde, stuck in a liminal space in which she is no longer Trojan but is also not quite Greek. This also problematizes any discussion of her treason; to whom does she owe loyalty once she has been traded away? In Guido, she is pumped for information about the Trojan camp, “all of which Briseide revealed to them with great eloquence in many words. Hence all the officers received her with fatherly affection” and gifts (19.248-249). There is no parallel scene in Chaucer.

⁶⁵ In her discussion of Helen, and her similarly liminal position as both Trojan and Greek, Robertson notes that “It is difficult to ascertain whose side Helen is on; perhaps the rape victim ultimately has no side” (290).

her status as a woman in a war zone, and as a result of her attempt to get back to her true love, would still mean being unfaithful to Troilus. “Lost” is the same word she uses earlier to describe what she is afraid of becoming if she elopes with Troilus.⁶⁶ Her intent, her meaning, her will—all of this would be negated, destroyed by force, in rape. This is a curious mix of real, pragmatic fear that is underlined again by the impossibility of making the body the proof of the will; what she wants, what she intends, would be trumped by the physical violation of rape.

Despite the danger, she decides to leave. Criseyde stares at Troy all day (5.709-711) and thinks “Of Troilus the grete worthynesse” (5.717). She makes her choice:

But natheles, bityde what bityde,
I shal to-morwe at nyght, by est or west,
Out of this oost stele in som manere side,
And gon with Troilus where as hym lest.
This purpose wol ich holde, and this is best.
No fors of wikked tonges janglerie,
For ever on love han wrecches had envye.
[...]
For which, withouten any wordes mo,
To Troie I wole, as for conclusion.
But God it wot, er fully monthes two,
She was ful fer fro that entencioun!
For bothe Troilus and Troie town
Shal knotteles throughout hire herte slide;
For she wol take a purpose for t’abide (5.750-756; 5.764-770).

Criseyde’s decision to go no matter what, “bityde what bityde,” and “by est or west,” “in som manere,” seems to be a firm resolution. Somehow she will get back to Troilus, no matter what people say, and “holde” her “purpose.” But in a master stroke, Chaucer follows Criseyde’s new “conclusion” in the second line of the stanza with the information

⁶⁶ She worries: “My name sholde I nevere ayeynard wyne; / Thus were I lost, and that were routhe and synne” (4.1581-1582).

that none of this will happen. Within two months, she will not only *not* try to escape, but she will make a conscious choice to stay. She is separated from her intention, even, and she will have a new “purpose” in mind: “t’ abide.” Jennifer Campbell points out that this passage is somewhat frustrating, wondering “Why...has Chaucer bothered to provide Criseyde with a point of view only to use it against her, to present her increasingly as other see her, just at the point where she struggles to understand history and her position in it?” (343). She argues that this is proof of Criseyde’s inherent unknowability, and the Narrator’s incompetence at truly understanding her. It is ironic, like much of the poem: at the moment when Criseyde finally uses her pragmatism to conquer her fear of social disapproval and danger, she is undercut by the events of the story. Campbell argues that “With this narrative gesture, Criseyde’s point of view is unalterably discredited and her betrayal of Troilus immanent” (356). However, there is nothing to suggest that it is *her* point of view which is “discredited.” It is, rather, that Criseyde’s point of view has always been overburdened in the poem.

Making the juxtaposition of Criseyde’s decision to leave and the Narrator’s warning that she will stay even more jarring is the chronological instability the Narrator employs from this point on. The Narrator returns to the tenth day, the day she has appointed to go. This back and forth, between the reassurances that the betrayal will happen and the narration of a Criseyde who is still firmly in love with Troilus, maintains narrative tension but also shows how complicated the circumstances of betrayal are. As the tenth day begins, Criseyde is determined to go, no matter what; she “out of th cite yde” (5.843). But before she can put her tenuous plan into action, Diomedes comes over.

The audience knows what Diomedes has in mind—he wants her for himself—but the Narrator insists that Criseyde does not:

Criseyde, that was in hire peynes stronge
For love of Troilus, hire owen kyght,
As ferforth as she konnyng hadde or might
Answerde hym tho; but as of his entente,
It semed nat she wiste what he mente. (5.864-868)

She is still applying all her mental faculties, her wit, to holding him off. The Narrator leaves room for doubt, of course, by suggesting that it only “semed” that she does not understand what Diomedes is hinting at. But one point does hit home for Criseyde: Diomedes scares her by telling her that Troy will fall, and none will be left (5.888-889). This is a clear threat against Troilus, but it is also a veiled reminder of the danger Criseyde herself will be in. As Hallissy points out, “Diomedes’s appeal to Criseyde is too courtly to mention the specifically sexual threat implicit in her situation and her urgent need for a new protector, but both know her danger” (153). She will ultimately be subject to some man’s lust; Diomedes slyly suggests that if she acts quickly, she can at least pretend to have some say in the matter. Fradenburg argues, as I noted, that Criseyde’s desire for Troilus may stem from necessity, not choice, and therefore it is impossible to determine if the consummation is rape or not. The same argument applies here; Diomedes does not threaten her directly with rape, but “the possibility has been raised...and this suggests that for a woman in Criseyde’s position sexual violence may *be* what she has for love, may *be* the medium of her consent” (Fradenburg 101). Diomedes seems to understand this, whether or not Criseyde does.

Her responses to Diomedes show the last spark of the old, careful Criseyde. All the equivocations, caveats, and conditionals, the “if” and the “emforth,” come to bear. If everything is changing, she concedes, she may change, too. Her base reality has been erased, shifted. So she will not make the same mistake she made with Troilus and make any even seemingly hyperbolic promises. As Priscilla Martin points out, “her dispirited surrender to Diomedes is only made possible by the chances of war. There is no reason to suppose that she would have deserted Troilus had she been able to stay in Troy” (162). Criseyde responds to Diomedes “As she that hadde hire herte on Troilus / So faste that ther may it non arace” (5.953-954), recalling the Narrator’s earlier use of “As” to problematize any understanding of Criseyde’s actual intent. She tells him that her “herte is now in tribulacioun” (5.988) and that she simply does not know anything anymore: “Herafter, whan y wonnen han the town, / Peraventure so it happen may / That whan I se that nevere yit I say / Than wol I werke that I nevere wroughte!” (5.990-993).⁶⁷ Troy, her world, is gone;⁶⁸ Troilus cannot be far behind. She swears by Pallas again that

If that I sholde of any Grek han routhe,
It sholde be youreselven, by my trouthe!

I say nat therefore that I wol yow love,
N’y say nat nay; but in conclusioun,
I mene wel, by God that sit above! (5. 1000-1004)⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Cf. Dorigen’s oath in “The Franklin’s Tale.”

⁶⁸ Criseyde speaks of Troy, first—she loves it, too, not just Troilus (5.956).

⁶⁹ Compare this weak clarification with her earlier, feistier warning to Troilus:

‘A kynge sone although ye be, ywys,
Ye shal namore han sovereigete
Of me in love, than right in that cas is;
N’y nyl forbere, if that ye don amys,
To wratthe yow...’ (3.170-174)

And to Pandarus: ‘And here I make a protestacioun

Campbell argues that Criseyde's dealings with Diomedes are far clearer than any she has previously had, showing "no such discrepancy between language and intention" (356). However, this "acceptance of Diomedes" is couched in the most subjunctive and tentative language yet (Campbell 356). Diomedes leaves with her glove, a love token, but it is phrased in such a way as to remove Criseyde from the taint of agency: "Hire glove he took" (5.1013). There is still nothing as yet to condemn Criseyde—only the Narrator's future perfect assurances that it will have happened. Mann argues that this echoes her acceptance of Troilus: "it is in the slow process of Criseyde's acceptance of Troilus that we learn to understand how, when the time comes, she will gradually abandon him for Diomedes" (19). As I have argued, there are several threads which weave together to force Criseyde into a position where returning to Troilus is not only not the best option, but not really an option at all.

The first real moment of betrayal occurs as she starts to consider staying in the Greek camp. As we have seen, Chaucer is careful to foreground deliberation as part of treason: Calkas, men, Lady Fortune all plan their betrayals. Although we are not made privy to Criseyde's thoughts as Diomedes attempts to persuade her to stay, the Narrator returns us to her inner thoughts after he has left, and what we find there seems to be deliberation. She carefully thinks through her new situation:

Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down
The wordes of this sodeyn Diomedes,

That in this process if ye depper go,
That certeynly, for no salvacioun
Of yow, though that ye sterven bothe two,
Though al the world on o day be my fo,
Ne shal I nevere of hym han other routhe.' (2.477-489)

His grete estat, and perel of the town,
And that she was alone and hadde nede
Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede
The cause whi, the soothe for to telle,
That she took fully purpose for to dwelle. (5.1023-1029)⁷⁰

Once she decides to stay, intends to stay, she has moved into the realm of betrayal, which can occur with the mere “compassing” or “imagining” of it. “That she took fully purpose for to dwelle” seems to be the damning clause. Her change of “purpose” recalls Calkas’s treachery, and “estat” echoes the oath she makes to Troilus not to remain in the Greek camp for any material benefit. What seems to be the driving force, however, is fear; she is back to being in “perel.” As I have argued, Criseyde’s fear of rape is key to her decision to stay with Diomedes, to choose the path of at least slight choice over none at all. But as Dinshaw suggests, this appearance of power may be the ultimate irony of the poem. Criseyde, she proposes, will be treated as a sexual object no matter what she does, and in the larger scheme of patriarchal power, her betrayal is meaningless: “The ‘slydyng’ of Criseyde’s ‘corage,’ then, her very ability to be unfaithful, is thus capable of being used to further patriarchal social organizations: the autonomous sliding of her heart is exactly what fits her for use as a thing passed between men” (58).⁷¹ It might seem that such a reading undercuts Chaucer’s treatment of betrayal in the poem, showing it all to be moot somehow. But I would argue that Dinshaw’s reading helps to deepen our

⁷⁰ Cf. Guido: Visiting Diomedes after he has been wounded by Troilus, she makes up her mind: “When she carefully considered that no assurance remained to her of uniting herself to Troilus, she, so variable and changeable, as is typical of women, inclined her whole thought toward Diomedes and changed her love” (26.51-54).

⁷¹ As Dinshaw sees it, by choosing to stay with Diomedes, “She acts...in the best interests of patriarchal society itself” (57). Having been abandoned by her father and then “forgone” by the Trojans, she is already “a woman traded between groups of men at war” (57).

understanding of just how complex the layers of betrayal can be. The patriarchy gets what it wants—and it still implodes anyway, with the betrayal of Antenor and Aeneas.

Moreover, the poem does not simply end with this, Criseyde's initial decision to stay, nor does Chaucer's presentation of her betrayal become simplified after it. He continues to problematize it, even after we have seen Criseyde take a clear step towards it. Yes, she has changed her mind, but he is careful to avoid detailing any specific actions. Her betrayal, until the very last letter she sends Troilus, remains in the realm of thought, intent. Campbell argues that the betrayal "has been consummated, as it were, in speech" (356), but where is the speech? Furthermore, the fact that we do not get a scene of actual sexual consummation, as we do in Book Three, is telling. On the one hand, there is no proof of a physical act of betrayal; on the other, as I have argued, it is not even so much the speech which makes Criseyde guilty, but the mere thought. Where exactly is the treason? Can it be pinpointed? This tension, highlighting the difficulty of mapping the mental space of treason, holds throughout the rest of the poem.

Accordingly, Chaucer substitutes any narration of a consummation or action of betrayal with a catalog of the gifts she gives to Diomedes. The gifts and tokens pile up, perhaps tangible proof of her change. But noticeably, the Narrator refuses to report these on his own; he hides behind his sources. Diomedes has taken her glove, but Criseyde begins to give gifts herself, as "the storie telleth us" (5.1037): a horse (5.1038), her sleeve (5.1043), and worst of all, "ek a broche—and that was litel nede— / That Troilus was" (5.1040-1041). The narrator is once again trying to have it both ways; he claims that he is simply reporting what "the storie telleth us," but then adds in his own condemning aside

that the brooch was in particular bad taste. Campbell, in fact, argues that Chaucer includes the exchange of love tokens in Book Three for the sole purpose of signifying “her final betrayal” in Book Five (349). Richard Firth Green makes a similar point, noting that when Troilus discovers the brooch on Diomedes’s shield (5.1660-66), he takes it as a sign of betrayal: “The agonizing indecision in which Troilus is left by Criseyde’s carefully crafted epistolary evasions is brutally resolved by the discovery of his parting love-token to her pinned to Diomedes’s ‘cote-armure’” (279). Even if this is how Troilus understands it, however, Hansen claims that there is nothing from Criseyde here to suggest “that she has any such clear or deliberately motivated intentions” (172). The Narrator hides behind his sources again when he must report the vital blow, the biggest gift: it is “in stories elleswhere” (5.1037) that “Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte” (5.1050). Even here, however, despite the narrator’s hemming and hawing, he refrains from actually narrating the exact moment itself.

Similarly, we get Criseyde’s self-recriminations instead of any scenes of actual guilt. There is, significantly, no consummation scene with Diomedes, no strong declaration of love for him—or of disdain for Troilus. The closest Chaucer comes to suggesting an actual moment of betrayal is when he reports that “But trewely, the storie telleth us, / Ther made nevere womman moore wo / Than she, whan that she falsed Troilus” (5.1051-1053). The use of “whan” indicates that there is a specific moment in which the act occurred, “that she falsed” him. But it is nearly impossible to pin this particular time down, which is one more way in which Chaucer shows how complicated a

process betrayal is. The strongest condemnation against Criseyde comes from herself. In claiming that women⁷² will judge her most harshly, Criseyde seems to admit her guilt.

Thei wol seyn, in as muche as in me is,
I have hem don deshonour, weylaway
Al be I nat the first that dide amys,
What helpeth that to don my blame away?
But syn I se ther is no better way,
And that to late is now for me to rewe,
To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe.⁷³ (5.1065-71)

The pragmatism comes back with a new valence. All of her careful consideration has come to this; despite her consistent attempts to preserve her reputation, she has lost it, and lost it forever. She acknowledges that she “dide amys.” Her resolution to do what she can in terms of her new form of personal honor and at least stay true to Diomedes may seem cynical.⁷⁴ But on the other hand, this is the same methodology she has applied throughout the poem. She has always promised to be as true as circumstances allow her to be.

The unclear timeline at the end of the poem contributes to the slipperiness of how Chaucer presents the betrayal, particularly the letters Criseyde begins to send. As Ganim points out, “The event of Books IV and V seem sharply fragmented; time becomes more difficult to ascertain” (95). Chaucer has told us that two months have passed since

⁷² Women will be able to judge her because she knows that her story will be told again and again: “Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende, / Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge / No good word, for this bokes wol me shende” (5.1058-1060). As Dinshaw notes, “she is also aware of herself as the future victim of masculine reading: she knows that her literary reputation as a traitor is in fact set, that she’ll be interpreted only one way, by male *auctores* who write “these bokes” and by “wommen” who will believe them (53).

⁷³ In Guido, she also toys with Diomedes: “But she, who was much esteemed for her cleverness and astuteness, took care to delay the hope of Diomedes with clever wiles...” (21.23-5).

⁷⁴ As Dinshaw point out, “In some sense she *is* as ‘trewe’ to Diomedes as she was to Troilus” (62).

Criseyde was traded, but he seems to be keeping time for Troilus. He is deliberately cagey about the timeline on Criseyde's side: "But trewely, how longe it was bytween / That she forsook hym for this Diomede,⁷⁵ / Ther is non auctour telleth it, I wene (5.1086-1088). Using "forsook" returns the reader to the opening of the poem, a reminder that this has all been explained already. Yet Chaucer has complicated and delayed the moment for as long as possible, using flat assertions that the betrayal will happen, has happened, in place of clear scenes of treacherous action.⁷⁶ He refuses to take further part in the condemnation of Criseyde.

Ne me list this sely womman chide
Forther than the storye wol devyse.
Hire name, allas, is publysshed so wide
That for hire gilt it oughte ynough suffise.
And if I myghte excuse hire any wise,
For she so sory was for hire untrouthe,
Iwis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe. (5.1093-1099)

This is, of course, ironic; he is publishing her name himself here. Yet this ostentatious reluctance seems to hide what he is actually doing: presenting the mitigating circumstances for her treacherous reputation.

The most damning evidence seems to come in her letters; by the time we read them, at the end of Book Five, we know that she "took fully purpose" to stay, and has vowed to stay true to Diomede. Her letters, thus, are either naïve or outright lies.

Dinshaw admits that Criseyde "could easily be seen as preemptive and self-serving, for

⁷⁵ Guido makes the timeline much shorter: "That day had not yet declined towards the hours of evening" when Briseida changes her heart "and already it accorded more with her wish to be with the Greeks than to have been with the Trojans up to that time" (253).

⁷⁶ Dinshaw points out that "trewely" is a "crutch" of the narrator's, a narrative "tell" that accompanies any unpleasantries he has to relate about his heroine" (45), looking at 5.825-6, 5.1050-53, and 5.1085-92; Donaldson makes a similar point (73).

example, distorting the text and creating interpretations for her own benefit,” especially late in the poem (55). In one of the letters, Criseyde tells Troilus:

That also sone as that she mighte, ywys,
She wolde come, and mende al that was mys.
And fynaly she wroot and seyde hym thenne,
She wolde come, ye, but she nyste whenne.

But in hire letter made she swich festes
That wonder was, and swerth she loveth hym best,
Of which he fond but botmeles bihestes. (5.1425-1431)

The equivocations are still here: she will come “also sone as that she mighte,” and she “swerth she loveth hym best.” Given that we know she has decided to stay, these seem to be undeniably false promises. Yet I would argue that Chaucer has shown repeatedly that Criseyde tries to speak as precisely as she can; we cannot say for certain what would happen if the perfect opportunity presented itself for her to return. I would also argue that the language of her oath is significant. We have the narrator’s assurances that Criseyde has given Diomedes her heart, but there is nothing in the poem to contradict the idea that she still loves him “best.” Troilus’s response is equally informative; he continues “Bisechyng hire that sithen he was trewe, / That she wol come ayeyn and holde hire trouthe” (5.1585-86). This plea clearly indicates that to Troilus, nothing has changed. His argument rests on the principle that they are equal, that their mutual promise should still hold, that his being “trewe” and her “trouthe” are the same thing.⁷⁷ It is a straightforward equation for him—the equation of a man for whom the simple return

⁷⁷ Similarly, Troilus will not listen to Pandarus’s advice to find another woman once Criseyde has gone, refusing “to traysen a wight that trewe is unto me!” (4.438). He sees this as betrayal, nothing less; however, Troilus is not in the same new situation or danger that Criseyde is in. The exchange of Criseyde does not affect them equally. Robertson, in her discussion of marriage laws and female consent, points this out as well: “mutuality is at issue in this poem, but mutuality assumes a legitimate female subject, a precondition not self-evident in fourteenth-century practice” (296).

of his love will bring everything back to normal. But everything has changed for Criseyde; they are not equals, and they never have been.

This difference of situation and perspective, largely informed by gender difference, is key to Cox, who argues that there are greater forces at work in Troilus's despair at Criseyde's delay. For Cox, "within the literal parameters of the fictional story, Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus is her neglecting to maintain the romantic fantasy after leaving Troy" (48).⁷⁸ Like Dinshaw, she argues that it is the exchange of Criseyde which keeps her actions from being a betrayal at all; however, whereas Dinshaw's focus is on Criseyde's status as object, Cox's is on what she sees as Troilus's overreaction to Criseyde's unequal (to him) lack of despair: "That Criseyde acclimates herself into the culture into which she has been sold is perceived by Troilus to be a personal rejection of such magnitude as to constitute a devastating betrayal" (49). The real betrayal, according to Cox, is performed by the text itself: both the narrator and Troilus want to see the poem as a great romance or tragedy "even if the events being narrated betray their desires" (45).

The key moment of Criseyde's betrayal does not come until the end of the poem. In her final letter to Troilus, she is actively deceptive, calculating, more like Calkas, Pandarus, and Fortune here than at any other point. Priscilla Martin calls the final letter "horribly temporizing" (184), Mann "cheap dishonesty" (25).⁷⁹ In it, she paints herself as a victim, and then, in the first real glimpse of her counterparts from other poems, accuses

⁷⁸ Cox continues: "Indeed her crime is her exposing their romance as the *fin'amors* cliché that it was (48).

⁷⁹ Donaldson says it is "one of the most poisonously hypocritical letters in the annals of literature, one in which, with exquisitely selfish cruelty, she refuses to admit to him that she no longer loves him or intends ever to come back" (82).

Troilus of being unfaithful. She laments that “I herteles, I sik, I in destresse! / Syn ye with me, nor I with yow, may dele, / Yow neyther sende ich herte may nor hele.” (1594-96). Criseyde has suffered terribly, and it is possible that this emotion may still be genuine. However, the rest of the letter problematizes any possible sympathy for her; it is manipulative, cruel, unlike anything she has done so far. She acknowledges his letters, but says she cannot yet return, and cannot explain why “lest that this lettre founden were, / No mencioune ne make I now, for feere” (1602-3).⁸⁰ She accuses him of haste (5.1605) and selfishness, claims that it is only “wikked speche” that she “tarie” (5.1610), and finally, taking a page out of the Wife of Bath’s playbook, accuses him of leading her on:

And beth nat wroth, I have ek understonde
 How ye ne do but holden me in honde.
 But now no force. I kan nat in yow gesse
 But alle trouthe and ale gentillesse. (5.1614-1617)

She continues to promise to come:

but yet in swich disjoynte
 I stonde as now that what yer or what day
 That this shal be, that kan I naught apoynte.
 But in effect I pray yow, as I may,
 Of youre good word and of youre friendship ay. (5.1618-22)

In her final words, we see that she continues to speak in the hypothetical, in the possible, in the possibly true: how could she not be in “disjoynte?” How could she be able to pinpoint “what yer or what day” she would be able to return? We do, at this point, know that she has decided to stay with Diomedes, and the fact that she does not simply tell

Troilus here seems like a lie of omission. She seems to want Troilus to understand that in

⁸⁰ Boccaccio frames these reasons as explicitly and deliberately untrue: “Criseide had written to him and said that she loved him more than ever, and she had presented many false excuses for having remained so long without returning” (7.105). As we have seen, she has good reason to be afraid of the journey, but the juxtaposition of a real fear and the following false rumors casts doubt on what her priorities are now.

asking for his “friendship,” she is no longer asking for anything more than that. She closes the letter by noting that “Th’entente is al, and nat the lettres space” (5.1630); the words literally run together as she tries to pour meaning into what she is not saying, as the meter of the line risks overflowing. This is, thus, in keeping with how Chaucer has presented the slow shift into betrayal all along. Mann points out that “We do not see Criseyde deciding to betray – we do not even see her betraying—we see her realizing, at the end of the almost invisible process, that she has betrayed” (23).

It is Pandarus who calls it treason (5.1738) and ends his speaking role by wishing her dead (1742-43).⁸¹ The narrator keeps apologizing for Criseyde: to all women, he urges that “That al be that Criseyde was untrewe, / That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me. / Ye may hire gilt in other bokes se” (5.1774-1776). The Narrator thus points out that women are far more betrayed than betraying. Mann points to the irony in this: “it becomes an accusation of his own role in adding to the ‘bokes’ that chronicle her shame. The responsibility is all the greater since Criseyde’s very existence is a literary fiction; the poets invent the female inconstancy that they purportedly record” (15). But the poem has made it impossible for a simple explanation or moral to hold. It has shown how complicated charges of treason and betrayal are, particularly in the realm of romance. Believe only in Christ, the Narrator says later, “For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye, / That wol his herte al holly on hym lete” (5.1845-1846). But far from clarifying any discussion of treachery, such a reference actually highlights the problematics of betrayal. Christ is both the ultimate victim of betrayal, and the ultimate redeemer. The Christian

⁸¹As Hansen notes, “Once he has admitted his misogyny, Pandarus quite literally has no more words; such forthright hatred of women does not, after all, generate much original discourse” (179).

theology in which the narrator attempts to take refuge needs betrayal, requires it.

Without betrayal there is no salvation. Troilus ascends at the end of the poem, looking down and laughing at the world (1820); for him, the complexities that led to the betrayal are unimportant. For Criseyde, placed in the position of Judas for reasons largely out of her control, the complexities are everything.

Conclusion

I am, of course, not the first to examine Chaucer's presentation of Criseyde's treachery and find a more complicated picture than the opening lines of the poem would suggest. I have, as Priscilla Martin puts it, looked at the text with an eye to "using evidence that the narrator makes available but does not argue from himself" (184). She suggests that "The case against her is in some ways a classic example of 'blaming the victim.' Because she is a woman, Criseyde has no political power and she is condemned for the consequences of that powerlessness" (184). Cox argues that it is, in fact, irresponsible to condemn Criseyde without looking at the context: "To blame Criseyde without accounting for her dire circumstances is to legitimize misogynistic convention, to blame her for being both a woman and a victim" (48). Masi sees things in similar terms: Criseyde "must cope as well as she can and if she fall [sic] for Diomedes, we must conclude that she is a vulnerable woman who is trying to survive" (72). Hansen goes further, arguing that Criseyde is made a "scapegoat" for the "incapacities" of Pandarus and Troilus (174).

My goal has been to add to this discussion by taking a more thorough look at all of the treason and betrayal in the poem, not just Criseyde's. Chaucer provides several

counterexamples of treason, constructing a complicated and wide-ranging definition of betrayal. From the clear political treason of Calkas, to the manipulative deception of Pandarus, and even to the short-sighted rejection of Criseyde by the Trojans as a whole, Chaucer shows that betrayal takes many forms but revolves around knowledge, secrecy, and conscious thinking and planning. He also shows that, like the medieval English juries which Green cites, there is room to take context into consideration when judging such a terrible crime.

Against this backdrop, he highlights the complex sets of factors which culminate in Criseyde's decision not to risk an attempt to return to Troilus after being sent away, and not to make a clean break, decisions that some critics, as I have noted, do not see as *the* betrayal of the poem (Cox) or even, in fact, a betrayal at all (Dinshaw).⁸² Fradenburg argues that Criseyde's dilemma fits a typical, gendered pattern in medieval literature: "a heroization of suffering for [king, lord, nation]...typically devalorizes actual suffering, and devalorizes those who attempt to avoid it as well as those prohibited from inflicting it" (89). In choosing to stay, Criseyde takes the less heroic path, refusing to risk further violence to herself in order to keep her promise to Troilus. The real betrayal, it seems, occurs in the letters she sends to Troilus that conceal this very decision. Chaucer does not shy away from showing us these letters, nor does he refrain from making an interpretation of the events more difficult by employing a narrator who seems to protest Criseyde's innocence too much. Ultimately, what the poem says about betrayal is that it

⁸² Cox claims: "The narrator betrays Criseyde most of all by naming her as the betrayer" (48); Dinshaw argues "Her act of infidelity can thus be analyzed more in terms of complicity in than disruption or betrayal of fundamental masculine social control. What she betrays is not the power structure of masculine control; she betrays, in truth, only an illusion of reciprocity between men and women, an illusion generated as a cover for the real workings of traffic in women" (58).

is not always one simple act, but a series of events and decisions, a result of unequal circumstances and assumptions. Having the tried and true tools of authoritative sources and misogyny at his disposal, Chaucer elects to ignore the former and allow for a deeper understanding of the latter. Gendered codes of behavior and violence are at the root of Criseyde's circumstances, but her gender is not the sole cause of her actions.

The focus throughout the poem, as I have argued here, is on how ardently Criseyde works to keep herself from ever being in a position to betray anyone. Having been betrayed herself, she knows first hand how serious the consequences are. Her eventual inability to prevent the betrayal is part of what makes the poem a tragedy. Campbell laments that Criseyde "in short, is deluded" (354) into thinking she can control her fate; she argues that despite Chaucer's best intentions, he "has written a feminist work that fails to liberate women, a work that shows even the smartest of women ultimately unable to inhabit freely the world as we know it" (357). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Jill Mann argue that in his presentation of Criseyde, Chaucer is avoiding misogyny by showing that Criseyde is not a symbol of woman but a symbol of humanity in general. Hansen thinks that "The heroine in this story is not a wily manipulator of words and an agent of bad faith any more than she is an innocent victim, an agent of seduction, a mother or sister to be feared, or a hard text to read" (173); she is a "self-blinding reader, like most people" (173). Mann argues that betrayal in Chaucer seems to be a result of "the simple and inevitable reflex of the changeability that is the very life of human beings," not just women (19). As I have argued, however, Chaucer's handling emphasizes both the fragile nature of all promises

and human relations *and* the specifically gendered contexts that exacerbate them. The heavy focus in the poem on treason and betrayal ultimately works to show how tenuous all promises and pledges are, how delicately they balance on an assumption that two people can ever really mean the exact same thing in the exact same way. But by showing that even the clever, careful Criseyde cannot “inhabit freely the world” Chaucer is reflecting very real constraints on women, particularly in terms of male expectations of romantic fidelity. Troilus never seems to acknowledge that he is asking of Criseyde more than he is willing to do himself; nor does he consider the specifically sexual danger Criseyde would be in. Chaucer’s presentation of Criseyde’s dilemma thus allows readers to empathize with her,⁸³ even if this does not keep them from judging her.

Turner points out “there is no simple division between the personal and the political in Chaucer’s texts; indeed, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer uses a romance plot to comment on sociopolitical behavior and, in particular, on treason and betrayal” (238). This concern will remain front and center in his next poem, *The Legend of Good Women*. Indeed, what we see Chaucer do in that poem—portray a series of men who lie deliberately, gleefully, and with absolutely no compunction, in complete contrast to Criseyde—is, I will argue, an extension of the exploration of the various facets, qualities, and degrees of political treason and romantic betrayal which he begins in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

⁸³ Ganim notes: “The narrator, knowing the end, warns of its effect. But in a way he is wasting his breath, for empathy is something the audience must learn for itself” (80).

Chapter Four

“As a fals lovere so wel can pleyne:” Treason and the Legends of Bad Men

The most interesting aspect of *The Legend of Good Women*, for my purposes, is actually what many critics dislike about the poem: its exclusive focus on romantic traitors who are men. Chapter Four will focus on the male traitors of the stories of antiquity, primarily as seen in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, which is itself presented as a response to female outrage over Chaucer’s depiction of Criseyde as a romantically faithless woman in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the *Legend’s* Prologue, we learn that Criseyde’s actions have given all women a bad name, and Cupid, as the god of love, has had to deal with complaints ever since. He charges the *Legend’s* Narrator with treason against love in general.¹ The Narrator is saved only through the intercession of Cupid’s consort Alceste, herself a famously faithful woman, having chosen to die in place of her husband. Alceste commands that the Narrator compose a work which focuses on male treachery and betrayal, in order to balance the scales.²

As Michael Calabrese has pointed out, the *Legend* is “now fully reclaimed from the poor-stepchild status that has burdened it in classrooms and in critical circles

¹ Simon Meecham-Jones points out that “It is in the continuity of its ethical concerns that the *Legend of Good Women* is truly a sequel to *Troilus*,” not just in its chronology (146). See his “Intention, Integrity, and ‘Renoun’: The Public Virtue of Chaucer’s Good Women.” *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*. Ed. Carolyn B. Collete. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006. 132-154.

² Carolyn Dinshaw, in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, notes wryly that Chaucer thus “gets what he wants—a long series of passive women—and adds credibility to it by having a *woman* ask for it. In this masculine fantasy, woman herself authorizes the antifeminist work. But antifeminism is not, finally, man’s best friend: a totalizing vision such as Alceste’s not only silences women and constrains the letter but makes every man in the text unspeakable and, at last, unspeaking” (72). Just how “totalizing” Alceste’s command actually turns out to be is a debatable; as I argue, Chaucer works within a pattern and set of constraints, but works constantly to show variation.

throughout the twentieth century” (101).³ The poem, he argues, is “about women, men, love, sex, violence, and death,” and therefore should be ripe for both critical and classroom discussions (101). Yet the bulk of the critical work, as many scholars attest, has focused on the *Legend’s* dream-vision frame, the Prologue, which exists in two forms, the earlier F and the later, expanded G. The tales that follow the Prologue, however, are often seen as a duty or chore to read. In her introduction to a recent collection of essays on the *Legend*, Carolyn P. Collette states with great equanimity that “Chaucer’s *Legend* seems either to intrigue or to annoy its modern readers” (vii).⁴ Trying to strike a middle ground, Betsy McCormick points out that “sometimes it is a difficult task to be “interested” in the *Legend*” (“Feel” 259). Carolyn Dinshaw simply states that the *Legend* is “downright boring” (357).⁵

In fact, Sheila Delaney argues that the only way to rescue the poem, its “unambiguous praise of women,” from being regarded as a form of literary “punishment” is to view it as irony (“Rewriting” 87).⁶ This line of thought highlights what can be seen

³ See his brief article, “A Guide to Teaching *The Legend of Good Women*” in *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde and the Shorter Poems*. Eds. Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007. 101-106.

⁴ See *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*. Ed. Carolyn P Collette. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006.

⁵ For McCormick, see “A Feel for the Game: Bourdieu, Source Study, and *The Legend*.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. Vol. 28. 257-61. For Dinshaw here, see her “The Naked Text in English to Declare’: *The Legend of Good Women*” in *Chaucer’s Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*. Ed. William A. Quinn. New York: Garland, 1999. 347-362. Priscilla Martin, in *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons*, encapsulates the common argument that Chaucer himself was bored with the poem: “His frequent use of the figures of *abbreviatio* and *occupatio* and his expressions of impatience with the material suggest *ennui*” (203).

⁶ See Delaney’s “Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts.” *Chaucer in the Eighties*. Eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986. 75-92.

as comic aspects of the *Legend*, the repetitive nature of the tales and the narrator's increasingly frustrated tone, and considers the poem a self-mocking artifact. John Fyler argues that the very premise "leads to a wonderfully comic exercise in censorship and distorted emphasis" (99).⁷ In *Telling Classical Tales*, Lisa J. Kiser agrees, claiming that "Although the legendary is self-consciously 'bad art,' as parody it is quite carefully constructed" (97). But what if we take the poem at "face value," as Richard Firth Green, among others, has suggested ("Victimized" 4)?⁸ What happens if we read the poem as something other than a joke that outstayed its welcome, leaving a bored Chaucer to stop right in the middle of the tale of Hypermnestra? Priscilla Martin has argued that it is difficult to "find that any effect is clear or sustained in the Legends" (205), but the one theme that is both "clear" and "sustained" is the focus on betrayal.

One of the main reasons that critics seem to be dissatisfied with the poem is its seemingly misogynist depiction of women: they are all betrayed and victimized, some more brutally than others. Martin thinks that the poem is "reductive" (203) and unflattering to women because they are consistently portrayed as passive and witless: "No wonder the heroines of the Legend look rather stupid. If the men are villains, the women are idiots to believe them" (203). While this comes dangerously close to victim-

⁷ In *Chaucer and Ovid*. New Haven. Yale University Press, 1979.

⁸ See Green's "Chaucer's Victimized Women." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988): 3-18. In *Feminizing Chaucer*, Jill Mann places her "face-value" reading in the context of a feminist approach: "I shall assume that the poem really is about what it says it is about, and moreover that correction of the antifeminist clerical tradition is an enterprise quite as significant as any represented by the alternative themes that modern critics have 'discovered' in the work" (26-7).

blaming,⁹ Martin is not alone in seeing a disturbing repetition in the presentation of women done wrong. Carolyn Dinshaw perceives this reduction as a consequence of the Narrator's difficulty with Criseyde in his previous poem; now he "wants his females simple, stable, and orderly" (*Poetics* 66). Karma Lochrie, in *Covert Operations*, goes a step further, positing that the women's "extreme submissiveness and self-sacrifice in the face of outright deception and rejection from their male lovers represents one extreme case of female perversion" (212). But suffering, as Margaret Hallissy notes, was a common proof of female worth in the Middle Ages, particularly in the hagiographical tradition: "Suffering is good for women, providing an opportunity to attain heights of virtue" (26).¹⁰ The women in the poem indeed suffer a great deal, learning painful lessons that do not necessarily seem to leave them any stronger or wiser for it. But Chaucer does not simply focus on presenting the suffering in the poem; he gives multiple examples of how the men are able to bring this pain about. To write off the poem on the basis of its admittedly vexed portrayal of women is to ignore what else is going on in it: a carefully constructed methodology of romantic treason.

⁹ It would be difficult to argue, for example, that Lucretia or Philomela are somehow "idiots" to trust the men who ultimately rape them. Similarly, Aeneas lands on Dido's shore with a heroic reputation.

¹⁰ Throughout her study, *Clean Maids, True Wives, and Steadfast Widows*, Hallissy seems to privilege the women of the *Legend* at the expense of Criseyde: "In *The Legend of Good Women*, good women suffer for the love of bad men. Criseyde, not so good, attracts two good men to protect her. Life is unfair, that good women die martyrs to chastity while an unsteadfast woman has such good fortune" (154). At the same time, she argues that "it is a radical move for a medieval author to question, as Chaucer did, the necessary correlation between chastity and suffering" (26). This may stem from her belief that the misogyny of the writers of the Middle Ages was merely a byproduct of their time: "Their intent was honorable and consistent with the beliefs of the time on hierarchy and subordination" (23). While typical misogynist ideas may well have been "consistent" with current beliefs, it is problematic to suggest that they were "honorable" as well.

Moreover, the men in the poem are largely caricatures as well. This has prompted Elaine Tuttle Hansen¹¹ to wonder why Chaucer “make[s] most of them even more despicable than the traditional story demanded” (“Feminization” 57). They follow a pattern, varying only in style, flair, and speed. Each traitor under discussion here, Aeneas, Jason, Theseus, and Demophon, uses the woman (women, in Jason’s case) to provide sustenance, information, or sexual gratification—or all three—and then leaves her. The problem, Hallissy explains, is that “the men feel no responsibility to pay back such women’s generosity and no sense of commitment in response to their sacrifice. They take sacrifices made on their behalf as their due, and move on” (34). This ingratitude, which Chaucer continually emphasizes, deepens the treason each man commits; it is but one of the ways in which ideas about treason and gender intersect throughout the poem. Gender also plays a role in how the characters understand each other. Hallissy notes that

A major problem area in these painful relationships is keeping ‘trouthe.’ In medieval literature, the verbal commitment between men is a common motif. Men pledge their honors with their words, and they would lose self-respect and the respect of others if they failed in ‘trouthe.’ But agreements between men and women in the Legend often involve misunderstanding as to what, if anything, is being pledged; the women believe themselves committed, be-trothed, while the men do not (32).

As we will see, both Dido and Medea may reasonably consider themselves wed, and Ariadne fully believes that she and Theseus will be married as soon as they reach land.¹²

¹¹ In addition to her *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, see her “The Feminization of Men in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*” in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*. Eds. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989. 51-65.

¹² Hallissy notes that they all “believe themselves in legitimate marriages because of promises made in private” (29). The medieval practice of “clandestine marriages” will be explored further below.

However, Hansen notes that this gender binary is not so straightforward as it might initially appear: “abandoning a woman, like the earlier process of seducing one, is emasculating in one way or another: men’s infidelities and betrayal of women in this poem always involve them again in lies and storytelling, wiliness and other duplicities, ignoble escapes out of windows, and the complete failure of the chivalric obligation to protect the lady herself” (*Fictions* 7). Just as Chaucer complicates any idea of deception as gendered in *Troilus* by showing that Pandarus and Troilus lie as much, if not more, than Criseyde ever does, he plays with the gendered positions of his characters in the *Legend* as well, particularly with his depictions of Jason and Theseus. Ultimately, Hansen says, “His selection and treatment of good women ironically define the double bind in which the female in his culture is caught: victimized if she follows the rules of love and lives up to the medieval ideals of the feminine; unworthy, unloved, and unsung if she does not” (*Fictions* 2). Jill Mann argues for a more balanced approach as well: “It is by no means frivolous or flippant in its indictment of men or its sympathy for women” (26). It is my contention that this “double bind” is reflected not just in the *Legend* itself, but in its relation to *Troilus and Criseyde* as well; comparing the behavior of the “traitors” in each poem reveals in retrospect just how much Chaucer works to keep Criseyde from being the stereotype that the men actually are.

Chaucer frequently borrows the legal language of treason throughout the tales, and repeatedly uses the word “traitor” to describe the men, particularly Aeneas and Theseus. As Michael Hanrahan points out, speaking of romantic betrayers as traitors is

not necessarily unusual (230).¹³ But the degree to which this is the focus of the *Legend* is startling, and though some scholars have argued that the tales are repetitive to the point of banality, the ways in which the discourse of treason is used within the tales bears further scrutiny. The tales reveal that anxieties about romantic betrayal coexist in both straightforward and unusual ways with broader ideas of treason in the Middle Ages, particularly in terms of gender codes and behaviors. I am focusing in this chapter on Aeneas, Jason, Theseus, and Demophon because they are the most developed examples of men who seduce and betray their victims.¹⁴ There are three major factors that shape Chaucer's depiction of male traitors in the *Legend*. First, the men are all consciously lying to the women, flipping the typical medieval idea of women as deceivers. As I will show, the question of intent is a key to Chaucer's condemnation of the men; these men are consistent and deliberate liars. Second, the male traitors in the *Legend* all seem to relish their roles as true lovers; they are actively enjoying the performance of their deception, manipulating cultural codes of behavior in order to achieve their ends. Third,

¹³ In his article, "Seduction and Betrayal: Treason in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*," Hanrahan argues that the Prologue's main concern is the definition of treason. He concludes, however, that Alceste's definition rests on the idea "that all men are traitors" (230). As I will argue, her position, and the larger point of the poem, is more nuanced than that. Chaucer does not necessarily show all men to be treacherous; he shows that men are allowed to get away with their romantic treachery in a way that women are not.

¹⁴ Obviously, I am leaving out some of the worst villains in the poem: the two rapists, Tereus in "The Legend of Philomela," and Tarquin in "The Legend of Lucrece." Chaucer clearly considers both of them traitors; he calls Tereus a "traytour" (2324), and he calls the rape of Lucrece "tresoun" (1783). The rapes are in many ways the most vicious acts in the poem; Tereus rapes his sister-in-law, betraying a familial trust, and Tarquin rapes the wife of his hostess, betraying an honor code. Joseph Allen Hornsby, in *Chaucer and the Law*, makes a similar point (118). Both women have excellent reason to trust the men, and are thus betrayed in a far more violent and profound way than the other women in the poem. But my focus in this chapter is on the process of seduction and betrayal, on the ways in which the men deceive the women into loving them back. Therefore, the stories which involve rape do not fit the pattern I am examining here; they involve betrayal at its most brutal, but not in the same ways as the tales with which I am concerned here.

this enjoyment is in no way marred by any concern about the possible repercussions of their actions. None of the men, with the complex exception of Theseus, who uses his concern about his reputation as a tool with which to manipulate Ariadne, seems to worry about the damage that his treasonous behavior will do, either to his reputation or his own physical safety. This last is perhaps the most intriguing difference between Chaucer's male and female traitors.

Romantic Treason

The previous chapter examined the state of treason in the late fourteenth century in England; the turbulence of the last quarter, in particular, shows how powerful treason charges could be, and how often they could be manipulated to suit the needs of the accuser. Richard Firth Green, in *A Crisis of Truth*, claims that "It would hardly be an exaggeration to claim that the overriding political issue in the last two decades of the fourteenth century was the legal definition of treason" (213). Not only was the charge being applied more haphazardly, the number of people entrusted with bringing the charges was increasing. John G. Bellamy argues that Richard's reign was of the "utmost importance" in treason law, "producing experimental constructions, declarations of doubtful cases in parliament and new statutes" (109). Given the time frame of the *Legend's* production, following *Troilus and Criseyde* within a few years (circa 1386), the same culture of a heightened awareness of treason still holds. In fact, it is difficult not to read the elucidation of romantic treachery, with charges being brought sometimes by the female victims and sometimes by the narrator himself, in the context of the contemporary political upheaval of treason. As Joseph Allen Hornsby notes, "an Englishman living in

the last half of the fourteenth century had a number of opportunities to become acquainted with aspects of the law of treason” (125). Treason was a powerful legal weapon, one whose application was becoming more widespread, not less.

However, Chaucer’s exploration of betrayal and romantic treason in the *Legend* is markedly different from his presentation of the same issues in *Troilus*. In this chapter, a closer look at the actual 1352 Statute is in order, for Chaucer draws more heavily on the language of the Statute in *The Legend* than he does in *Troilus*. This, I would argue, parallels the more focused presentation of treason and betrayal in the later poem. My goal in the previous chapter was to show just how complex the discourse of treason could be, even in a poem dedicated to a single relationship’s rise and fall. Despite having an infamously treacherous woman at the center of the story, Chaucer takes a more complicated approach to dealing with treason in the poem, showing its multiple forms, and emphasizing the context, intertwined with ideas of gender and violence, from which the betrayal stems. In the *Legend*, Chaucer presents a relatively more straightforward picture of betrayal, and to do so he frequently echoes the language of the Statute itself.

The 1352 Statute seems fairly clear cut, focusing on offenses against the monarch and the realm. Ironically, given that the definition of treason clearly continued to be a problem throughout the Middle Ages, the Statute itself was a response to earlier concerns about the lack of a clear and stable understanding of what treason was or could be. As Green notes, the Statute’s preamble provides “incontrovertible evidence for such ambiguity: ““Whereas divers Opinions have been before this Time in what Case Treason

shall be said and in what not...” (207).¹⁵ Clearly, the Statute is designed to address not just what treason was, but also what it was not. Pollock and Maitland translate the rest of the Statute as follows:

(1) to compass or imagine the death of the king, his queen, or eldest son; (2) to defile the king’s wife or his eldest unmarried daughter or his eldest son’s wife; (3) to levy war against the king in his realm; (4) to be adherent to his enemies, giving them aid and comfort; (5) to counterfeit the king’s great or privy seal or money; (6) to bring false money into the realm; (7) to slay certain officers or justices being in their places doing their offices. (502, n. 6; citing *25 Edw. III 5.2*)¹⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the first part of the statute is crucial in the construction of treason law because it implies that people can be accused, tried, and convicted based on thoughts alone. It is the planning, the internal machinations that constitute treason, not necessarily the attempt itself. This “compassing” is the idea, and the word, Chaucer uses most frequently to indicate that the men in the tales are plotting treasonously. The rest of the statutes reveal what the highest priorities in the realm are: the royal bloodline, the king’s reliance on his own officers and soldiers, and the king’s ability to guarantee currency and signs of authority. Within the various legends, Chaucer draws on several of these concepts as well: for example, Jason is said to counterfeit his love.

But even after the 1352 Statutes, as mentioned earlier, the more feudal idea of treason as personal betrayal still held. M.V. Clarke argues, in fact, that in 1388, Parliament specifically did not use the 1352 statutes, but used the common law ideas of

¹⁵ He cites *25 Edw. 3, stat. 5, C.2; SR 1:319*.

¹⁶ Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland. *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd edition. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

treason to charge Richard's favorites (126).¹⁷ Although there is a much greater emphasis on the language of the Statute in the *Legend*, Chaucer continues to draw on the common ideas of betrayal as well. Green argues that Chaucer "goes out of his way to emphasize that the perfidious lovers swear quite specific oaths of fidelity to their ladies" ("Victimized" 14). These oaths, it should be noted, are clear and straightforward, nothing like Criseyde's complex, sometimes equivocal promises. The men rarely leave themselves loopholes; this, I will argue, is not because they are not as clever as Criseyde, necessarily, but because they do not have the same internalized pressure to hold themselves to their word. Unlike Criseyde, they do not fear social repercussions for their untruth.

In the literature of the Middle Ages, no matter the sphere—legal, social, romantic—treason always involved the element of deliberate deception, of hiding malicious intent. Having tried his hand already at presenting a dense, heavily nuanced presentation of romantic treachery in *Troilus*, Chaucer tries another tactic in the *Legend*. Here, he gives the reader multiple examples of traitors, all following a similar pattern but adapting the methods as needed, and all operating without the constraints that his earlier betrayer, Criseyde, faced. The men commit treason by their conscious, calculated deception of those who put their trust in them, who love them until and, bitterly, even after it is too late. Hornsby argues that "While there is certainly something unsavory about lovers who break their vows to one another, some irony is apparent in associating

¹⁷ In her article, "Forfeitures and Treason in 1388," she argues that "the narrow definitions and the limited penalties of the treason statute [of 1352] were the direct cause of the ambiguities of judicial construction and of the frank injustice of attainder" (132). Whether such focused definition and punishment were in fact the "direct cause" is debatable; surely the high stakes of the political maneuvering of the 1380s also played a role.

that act with the considerably more reprehensible crime of treason” (134). However, Chaucer shows again and again in the poem, irony notwithstanding, that the behavior of the men and the consequences of these betrayals are far more than “unsavory.” Though the *Legend* might seem hyperbolic, even comic, as a discussion which elevates romantic betrayal to the level of an offense against king and country, it represents the invidious commonplace forms of treason, betrayals at the heart of people’s lives, which can lead to upheaval and death just as easily as treachery against king or country.

Treason in *The Legend*

The poem begins with a Prologue that is longer than some of the tales that follow. Suzanne C. Hagedorn¹⁸ has pointed out that “critical discussions of the poem have frequently chosen to focus on it [the Prologue] and ignore the legends of individual women that follow it, thus consigning these female characters to a marginal status in the criminal tradition” (167).¹⁹ I do not wish to enact Hagedorn’s charge of marginalization here; the bulk of this study will focus on the tales themselves. But I would like to start first with an examination of the prologue. As Delaney points out, it is not only possible but helpful to look at the two sections of the poem “as theory and practice” (*Naked* 70).²⁰ While my primary focus is on the *Legend’s* treacherous seducers, Aeneas, Jason,

¹⁸ See her *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Kiser makes a similar point (95).

¹⁹ Martin, for example, argues that “The Prologue is as lovely, subtle and suggestive as anything Chaucer wrote but the stories are wooden and vexing” (197).

²⁰ See her *The Naked Text: Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Theseus, and Demophon, it is necessary to look at the poem's Prologue to see how it provides a framework for thinking about betrayal and treason in the poem proper.

The Prologue

The Prologue is a good place to begin a discussion of treason in the poem—what it means, how it happens, and what it does to people (or birds, as the case may be)—because it is here that Chaucer introduces the concept.²¹ The Prologue's dream vision framework contains the typical elements of an obsessed narrator who finds himself drowsily observing the natural world around him. He listens to the birds sing, and what they sing about sets the stage for the whole poem: betrayal.²² The birds sing about the fowler, their natural enemy, who, "for his covetyse, / Had hem betrayed with his sophistrye" (136-137). What is most surprising is that the Prologue's focus on betrayal reverses the balance of representation of the treason itself and the victim's ability to heal from it. In fact, the use of "betrayal" here is a little ambiguous; since the birds and the fowler would appear to be natural enemies, with no expectation of trust, the exact nature of the betrayal is unclear. Other than the fact that the fowler "hem made awhaped, / In winter, and destroyed hadde hire brood" (132-133), we do not know just how the betrayal happened. But in the Prologue, unlike in the legends themselves, the exact nature does not seem to matter. In a striking inversion of the legends, the Prologue focuses ultimately on the birds' attempts to recover, to heal themselves. This is why they sing in the first

²¹ For consistency's sake, I will use the F Prologue, noting the G Prologue's variations as needed.

²² In *Chaucerian Polity*, David Wallace suggests that "This passage [F 125-139] continues to play as an overture to the poem to come, although its themes are realized more as accidents of style than as the substance of narrative argument" (351). However, as this passage introduces the idea of betrayal, I would argue that it informs the entire narrative.

place—not to relive the tragedy, but to effect their own catharsis: “in his despit hem thoghte yt did hem good / To synge of hym, and in hir song despise / The foule cherl” (134-136). It helps the birds to sing about their experience, the pun on “the foule cherl” perhaps suggesting the start of their newfound lightness. But more importantly, this song highlights one of the key aspects of treason, the personal devastation, and the loss of power and control. Telling the story is taking back control, the same kind of control that is so problematic at the intersections of reputation, gender, and politics in the late fourteenth century.

Betrayal, recognizing it and then moving on from it, continues to be a theme in the “layes of love” which the birds sing next (140). Romantic betrayal is thus highlighted before we even get to the poem proper. Here, though, the focus is not simply on the betrayed expressing their feelings. The betrayers themselves chime in, asking for forgiveness:

And thoo that hadde doon unkyndenesse—
As dooth the tydif, for newfangelnesse—
Besoghte mercy of hir trespassynge,
And humblely songen hire repentynge,
And sworn on the blosmes to be trewe
So that hire makes wolde upon hem rewe,
And at the laste maden hire accord. (153-159)

Those who have themselves “doon unkyndenesse,” in the sense of both acting unnaturally and unkindly, admit their crimes, their “trespassynge,” and ask for “mercy.” It is this acknowledgment which paves the way for healing on both sides; for the betrayers, this comes through “repentynge” and new oaths of fidelity, and for the betrayed, healing comes from through forgiveness and pity, “mercy” and “rewe.” The

rhymes in this passage echo the the process of betrayal itself: the betrayals stem from “unkyndenesse” and “newfangelnesse,” the acknowledgment of the “trespassynge” leads to the “repentyng,” and the new promises to be “trewe” are what allow the betrayed mates to bestow their “rewe.” In the end, a new pact, a new “accord” is reached.

In the Prologue, thus, the Narrator watches as the birds enact in a mini-version of what the heroines in the *Legend* proper will struggle through, some more successfully than others. But the birds have an easier time of it, as we will see. The women will try to sing their woes, try to explain what happened to them. Some of the women, like Dido, ultimately resign themselves to their fate, and some, like Hipsyple, shift their anger to other women. But none will reconcile with her betrayer, as the birds do. The men will offer no such apologies or acknowledgment of their actions, leaving the women no opportunity to grant them mercy or pity, and thus no possibility of an “accord.” The Narrator leaves the birds happier than he found them:

And thus this foweles, voide of al malice,
Acordeden to love, and laften vice
Of hate, and songen alle of oon accord,
‘Welcome, somer, oure governour and lord!’ (167-170)

But the same cannot be said of the women in the legends.

While the Prologue creates a contrast, sets up the possibility of a reconciliation that will never happen, it also provides ways of looking at treason in the tales. The god of love accuses Chaucer of having “myssayest” what the god’s previous representatives really meant to say about love. This both calls into question the problem of language

itself as a means of representation and highlights the problem of determining intent, which will prove to be a deciding factor in cases of betrayal in the poem. Cupid seems to imply that this misrepresentation was deliberate. Accordingly, Alceste defends the narrator by arguing that he never wrote things against love “of malice” (371), never, she claims, with the intent to do harm. Chaucer seizes upon this explanation himself, saying that no matter

what so my auctour ment,
Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was my menyng. (470-474)

His intentions, he promises, were good, his “entente” and “menyng” to support Love, not denounce it. This struggle to reassert control of intent and meaning not only echoes the birds’ debate, but also Criseyde’s dilemma, and it foreshadows what is a major theme of the Legends themselves, treason’s disastrous effects on control and the power of definition over the present, the past, and the future.

The G Prologue has an even greater focus on the idea of intent. For one thing, it is more prominent early in the poem, as Chaucer states plainly that “my entente is, or I fro yow fare, / The naked text in English to declare” (85-6). Intent is also highlighted in G when the god of Love expounds upon all the women in the world whom Chaucer could have written about, instead of Criseyde. These women held fast to their sexual purity, were true to their men, whether that took the form of maintaining virginity, wedding vows, or fidelity to the memory of a dead husband (G 294-5): “And this thing was nat kept for holynesse, / But al for verray vertu and clenness, / And for men schulde sette on

hem no lak” (G 296-8). Cupid argues that these women demonstrated their worth by keeping themselves chaste or faithful because of their own love of “vertu and clenness,” their own internalization of social values. He also, however, notes their fear for their reputation, a possible dig at Criseyde.²³ For Cupid, then, it is the women’s pure intent that makes their steadfastness even better.

Both versions also make it clear that the *Legend* is intended to be seen as a response to *Troilus and Criseyde*; here again, the G Prologue expands the discussion. In F, the specific problem that the god of love has with Chaucer is that he damaged love’s reputation by writing the story of Troilus and Criseyde, making men less likely to trust women in love: “And of Creseyde thow has seyde as the lyste, / That maketh men to wommen lasse triste, / That ben as trewe as ever was any steel” (332-334). Even “trewe” women come under the shadow of Criseyde’s betrayal, which has already created a problem for the god of love. However, in G, Criseyde, or the specter of Criseyde, plays a much larger role:

Hast thow nat mad in Englysh ek the bok;
How that Crisseyde Troylus forsook,
In shewynge how that wemen han don mis?
But natheles, answere me now to this;
Why noldest thow as wel [han] seyde goodnesse
Of wemen, as thow hast seyde wikednesse?
Was there no good matere in they mynde,
Ne in alle thy bokes ne coudest thow nat fynde
Som story of wemen that were goode and trewe? (G 264-272)

²³ Simon Meecham-Jones argues that one of the main questions in the *Legend* is whether virtue is public or private (147). The women, generally considering themselves to be wedded or pledged, may have a stronger sense of private virtue than those who would judge them.

Instead of simply being the cause of lessened trust, with no specific accusation of betrayal attached, Criseyde here is portrayed as having actively betrayed Troilus. She is also the emblem of Chaucer's shortcomings: his scholarship is accused of being imbalanced and shallow, not thorough enough to find "som story" of good women.

Ultimately, Chaucer is excused for his transgressions; this is because Alceste persuades the god of Love that the damage done by his earlier work is the result of carelessness, not malicious intent or deliberate betrayal on Chaucer's part:²⁴

A ful gret neglygence
Was it to the, to write unstedfastnesse
Of women, sith thow knowest here goodnesse
By pref, and ek by storyes herebyform.
Let be the chaf, and writ wel of the corn.
Why noldest thow han writen of Alceste,
And laten Criseide ben aslepe and reste? (G 525-531)

Interestingly, in the F prologue, the "neglygence" of which Cupid accuses Chaucer is simply not mentioning Alceste in his catalog (537-543). In the G prologue, this has been expanded to his failure to include the whole category of faithful women. But what is most striking here is that once again intent plays a role in determining the guilt of the accused, or at least the nature of the charge against the accused. He did not *mean* "to write unstedfastnesse / Of women," Alceste suggests, and so he cannot be found guilty of treason. As noted above, it was the "compassing," the deliberate, conscious plan to betray that was privileged in treason definitions. The Narrator's earlier work, thus, is

²⁴ Mann claims that "If the legends represent Chaucer 'rescuing' women, the Prologue shows us Alceste 'rescuing' Chaucer; his pity for suffering woman is mirrored in her 'pite' for the accused poet" (38). Alceste, thus, becomes a crucial site for interpretations of the poem. For Dinshaw, again, Alceste's request for the list of good women is part of the poem's basic misogyny; for Mann, the request is a sign of a grace from a more powerful figure who happens to be female.

distinct from the behavior of the men in the tales, who are specifically branded traitors because they do mean all along to betray the women.

Even though Alceste's argument proves persuasive, Chaucer still has some atoning to do. Alceste presents Chaucer with a specific challenge: to write a poem about those good women he ignored earlier, and to show that men can be just as untrue, if not worse. He must compose

a glorious legende
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in loving al hire lyves;
And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
That al hir lyf ne don nat but assayen
How many women they may doon a shame;
For in your world that is now holde a game. (483-489)

Chaucer must discuss a range of women, all of whom were “trewe in loving,” and contrast them with “false men” who not just betrayed them, but did so with consistency, focus, purpose, and disturbing playfulness. Some argue that such a charge indicates the irony Chaucer intends; it is too one-sided a charge to be taken seriously. Donna Schlosser has said that “Cupid dictates that betrayal in love is to be presented only as the experience of women—not that trouthe-keeping in love has been demonstrated by women and men alike” (46).²⁵ The god of love's charge is pointed, yes, but so is the context of the charge—Chaucer has already “demonstrated” a “trewe” man in Troilus, and as I have argued in the previous chapter, he works repeatedly to show that Criseyde's

²⁵ See her “Imagery, Rhetoric, and Imagination: Chaucer's Three-point Perspective on ‘Trouthe-keeping’ in the *Legend of Good Women*” in *Gewardagum* 22 (2001): 43-55. She argues that Chaucer's main point in the poem is “that spoken words require help if they are to be remembered and available to imaginations across the ages” (51).

behavior to Troilus is caught up in far more complicated matrices of survival and intent than most of the male traitors in the *Legend*.

This, then, is the framework which begins the legends themselves, a framework concerned not just with betrayal in its various forms (by the fowler, the birds themselves, Criseyde, and Chaucer), but also the thoughts behind it, the “compassing,” the intent. The Prologue also deals with the problem of how to react to betrayal, with acknowledgment, atonement, verbalizing, singing, and forgiveness. Delaney argues that “What the Prologue constructs, then, is an aesthetic and a definition of nature against which the God of Love can only appear absurd in demanding a poetry that effaces contradiction” (“Rewriting” 80). But what is revealed in the legends is how much human nature complicates everything. There is no forgiveness to be found in the legends—a call for reparations, perhaps, and balance, but no forgiveness, no moving on for the victims. Unlike the birds, who have a natural means of expressing their sorrow themselves, and are able to start again, the women are left wiser, but without the means of starting over.

The Traitors

Aeneas

Coming immediately after the presentation of the *Legend's* sole decent man, Piramus, the Legend of Dido presents Aeneas in a particularly unflattering light. As many scholars point out, Chaucer did not have to portray his Aeneas this way.²⁶ In *The Aeneid*, Virgil provides the excuse of divine intervention to get Aeneas off the hook for

²⁶ Christopher Baswell points out that there were “widely known rival versions” of the story (78). See his *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. As we will see, however, Chaucer frequently changes aspects of the stories even when there are not.

abandoning Dido, in the form of Mercury hurrying him along to his more important task of empire building.²⁷ Ultimately, the basic elements of the Dido and Aeneas story are the same²⁸ no matter which version one reads: Aeneas and his men flee the sacked Troy, land at Carthage in dire straits, and are provided for by the powerful and widowed queen, who then falls in love with Aeneas and is devastated when he leaves to continue his voyage to found what will become Rome. Chaucer had already told a version of the Dido and Aeneas story in his *House of Fame*; there, Chaucer follows both Ovid and Virgil, offering an occasional mitigating factor in Aeneas's abrupt departure from Dido. Such is not the case in *The Legend of Good Women*.

The picture of Aeneas here is clearer and far more negative. Drawing more heavily on Ovid, Chaucer focuses on the Dido and Aeneas affair explicitly and exclusively from her point of view. As Louis Brewer Hall puts it, "Aeneas is reported only as he appears to Dido" (156).²⁹ In the *Legend*, Chaucer uses this point of view to highlight the conscious, deliberate nature of Aeneas's deception of Dido; Richard Firth Green notes that Aeneas comes off as "a calculated perjurer" here ("Victimized" 10). Chaucer reminds us at every step that Aeneas is fully conscious that he is deceiving her and

²⁷ See Book II, lines 299-375.

²⁸ This includes the fact that Dido and Aeneas actually lived hundred of years apart, meaning that the whole story was "a chronological impossibility" (Baswell 19).

²⁹ See his "Chaucer and the Dido-and-Aeneas Story." *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963): 148-158.

highlights the ways in which Aeneas plays the perfect lover, never once bothered by what his deception will do to Dido or his own reputation.³⁰

We are told immediately that the tale is about “How Eneas to Dido was forsworn” (972), recalling the opening lines of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which state bluntly that Criseyde “forsook” Troilus. However, this parallel does not hold, for immediately after this announcement, Chaucer gives us an Aeneas who seems to relish his performance as the faithful lover despite knowing that he will have to leave Dido. Aeneas can only be “forsworn,” of course, if he has sworn something to Dido in the first place.³¹ Robert W. Frank argues that “the rituals of courtly love rarely intrude in the narratives themselves” (14).³² However, as Hornsby notes, the cave scene enacts fairly accurately the courtly love version of a feudal bond of fealty (67). In the *Legend’s* version of the famous cave scene, in which Dido and Aeneas consummate their “love,” the Narrator describes Aeneas’s courtly performance and pledge of love to Dido:

For there hat Eneas ykneled so,
and told hire al his herte and al his wo,
and swore so depe to hire to be trewe
For wel or wo and change hire for no newe;
and as a fals loveure so wel can pleyne,
That sely Dido rewede on his peyne,
And tok hym for husbonde and becom his wyf
Fore evermo whil that hem laste lyf. (1229-1239)

³⁰ See Joanna Scott, “Betraying Origins: The Many Faces of Aeneas in Medieval English Literature.” *LATCH* 3 (2010): 64-84.

³¹ Hagedorn points out that this never happens in Virgil (173).

³² Frank’s *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* focuses largely on the comedy within the poem; it seems to me, however, that many of the poem’s themes and images blend the comic with the serious.

Aeneas kneels in the classic pose of the suppliant, pours out his heart,³³ and swears he will be “trewe” to her. “Trewe” has many valences in the Middle Ages, as Green points out, but all of them revolve around fidelity, trust, and the creation of a bond. It is her promises of “truth” that partially condemn Criseyde. Crucially, though, Chaucer never implies that her words are false as she is speaking them; here, he states clearly that Aeneas is “fals” from the start.

Dido clearly seems to understand this pledge as a kind of wedding vow. Hornsby contends that they this may well have indicated a marriage scene.³⁴ The only absolute requirements for marriage in the Middle Ages were the consent of both parties and a consummation.³⁵ What Aeneas gives here, as many of the lovers do (including Jason, Theseus, and Demophon), are “promises of future consent,” in his promise to be true, and the consummation that follows seals the deal, as far as Dido is concerned (Hornsby 67). Whether they would legally be considered married or not, there seem to be two main points here: one, that Dido considers Aeneas’s words to be a binding promise; and two, that Aeneas presents himself as making a binding promise even though he does not mean it. He is lying, acting “as a fals love so wel can pleyne.” Moreover, he could be any “fals love” performing this scene, and thus Chaucer is constructing one layer of treasonous behavior as the deliberate, deceptive manipulation of social customs.

³³ He leaves out, apparently, the fact that he lost his first wife Creusa during the flight, although he managed to escape with his son and his father. This prioritizing of his male relatives might have been a clue that his patriarchal duty will always come first.

³⁴ He is drawing on an idea initiated by H.A. Kelly. See *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

³⁵ See Hornsby, especially pp. 56-68.

But Chaucer makes it clear that Aeneas is lying throughout, and deliberately “feyneth hym so trewe and obeysynge” (1266) that she cannot help but fall in love. Again, this is in clear contradistinction to Criseyde. As Hagedorn puts it, “Aeneas plays at being Dido’s lover” (183). While this has very serious implications for Dido, the element of “play” is also key here. In fact, the descriptions of his repeated gestures of love and commitment take on an almost comic tone as the narrator overexcites himself in trying to explain Aeneas’s hyperbolic courting of Dido. He is

So gentil and so privy of his doinge,
And can so wel don alle his obeysaunces,
And wayten hire at festes and at daunces,
And whan she goth to temple and hom ageyn,
And fasten til he hath his lady seyn,
And beren in his devyses, for hire sake,
Not I not what; and songes wolde he make,
Justen, and don of armes many thynges,
Sende hire letters, tokens, broches, rynges—
Now herkneth how he shal his lady serve! (1267-76)

Aeneas’s behavior in these “courtly games” (Hagedorn 180) is so conspicuously correct that the narrator cannot even relate it in a coherent manner, the description devolving into an anaphora of “And”s until the narrator simply gives up.³⁶ He is noble, discreet, talented, well-bred, temperate, and generous—the perfect courtly lover. The narrator does not even know what else Aeneas gets up to in expressing his devotion to Dido, breaking off into admissions of uncertainty (“Not I not what”) and vagueness (“don of armes many thynges”). Aeneas is so clever at courting Dido that he even outsmarts the narrator.

³⁶ Delaney notes the comical use of anaphora as well (*Naked* 196).

The last phrase of the scene, “how he shal his lady serve,” both cements the courtly nature of the promise and relationship and sets up the ultimate betrayal. The whole preceding passage is set in the context of Aeneas faking it, of deliberately attempting to “feyneth hym so trewe and obeysynge” that Dido will love—and help—him.³⁷ It is this conscious deception that makes Aeneas and the rest of the betrayers in the *Legend* so different from the poem’s ostensible *raison d’etre*, Criseyde. While she leaves both Troilus and Troy at the end of the *Troilus*, the extent to which she consciously or deliberately deceives Troilus is, as the last chapter has shown, debatable. Aeneas, however, has clearly been not only lying to Dido, but doing it on purpose. He puts effort into his deception. He tries. And when he has had enough, he leaves: “This Eneas, that hath so depe yswore, / Is wery of his craft withinne a throwe, / The hote earnest is al overblowe” (1286-7). When he stops having fun, becomes “wery of his craft,” he simply stops playing and takes off. As Frank points out, “We have a sufficiently comprehensive picture of Aeneas playing the game of love when and as long as it pleased his fancy” (75). Chaucer works to undercut any excuse Aeneas may have had to leave Dido by showing an Aeneas who does not simply love and leave her, but enjoys deceiving her about both.

In fact, there is a striking and deliberate omission here that seems impossible to interpret as anything other than Chaucer trying to emphasize Aeneas’s cruelty to Dido: the narrator never corroborates Aeneas’s claims that it is the gods who insist that he leave

³⁷ Delaney characterizes Aeneas as a “kept man,” (*Naked* 197), with Baswell going one further and calling him a “weepy kept man” (264). This phrase itself plays on gendered codes—a “kept” man is somehow unmanly. Further discussion of the “feminization” of the traitors follows in the section on Jason.

Dido. Only after the narrator has explained that Aeneas has become “wery of his craft” do we hear from Aeneas that his father’s ghost and Mercury have informed him that he must leave, in what Hall states “sounds like an improbable excuse” (158):

this nyght my faderes gost
Hath in my slep so sore me tormented,
And ek Mercurye his message hath presented,
That nedes to the conquest of Ytalye
My destine is sone for to sayle. (1295-1299)

As Delaney points out, “Coming as it does between the Narrator’s assurances of Aeneas’s dishonesty, the passage virtually presents itself as a lie” (*Naked* 199). Now his performance changes to the distraught lover, crying “false teres” (1301) to a finally suspicious and indignant Dido.³⁸ Frank, for one, finds that Aeneas’s sheer cheek “individualizes” him (77).³⁹ Ultimately, though, he leaves in what will become a “thoroughly formulaic” way (Hagedorn 184) for the false lovers of the *Legend*: “For on a nyght, slepyng he let hire lye, / And stal away unto his companye” (1326-1327). Hoping to avoid a scene, presumably, he leaves while she is sleeping. This “ingratitude,” as Frank points out, “compounds Aeneas’ sins against Dido” (74). This idea of gratitude, indebtedness, factored into medieval conceptions of treason. Green notes that in cases of personal treason, “the greater the debt of gratitude owed, the more heinous the treason” (*Crisis* 209). But Aeneas does not seem to care how his actions might be perceived. The

³⁸ Again, although Chaucer’s sources frequently point out that Criseyde’s tears are false, he never describes Criseyde’s anguish as anything other than genuine.

³⁹ Frank also argues that Aeneas “did not seek Dido’s destruction; he was only after a good time” (77). However, his callous disregard for what might become of her after he leaves, and his apparent thanklessness indicate that even if he did not intend her “destruction,” he is not at all bothered by it. My view is shared by Delaney, who notes that “his behavior is nothing short of sleazy” (*Naked* 199).

Narrator, disgusted, finally states that it is “as a traytour forth he gan to sayle” (1328).

Aeneas’s behavior has been full of lies, in the form of words, gestures, and actions, and culminates in his ultimate identity as “traitor.”

Jason

Jason’s treasons evolve in much the same way as Aeneas’s: he relies on a woman for help, portrays himself as the perfect lover until she succumbs, and leaves when he has what he needs—twice. But in telling the story of Jason’s betrayals, Chaucer develops the discussion of treason in several fascinating ways. For one, there are two women involved, and two stories of betrayal with which to work. Both Hipsipyle and Medea fall victim to Jason’s treachery.⁴⁰ But more interestingly, Chaucer explores gender and treason in this legend by showing multiple scenes of treachery: we see men betraying both women and other men, as well as men working together to betray women. Moreover, part of this plotting involves playing with gender codes themselves. It is tempting to see this as a betrayal of another sort, and Chaucer undeniably spends more time condemning Jason than any other of the perfidious men. Jason uses his deceptive abilities to perform both masculinity and femininity, and he succeeds at both. But even while he shows Jason manipulating accepted gender behavior, Chaucer makes it clear that what makes Jason monstrous is his treatment of the women, his romantic treason, not necessarily a betrayal of his own gender.⁴¹ What makes Jason a traitor is what makes

⁴⁰ Hansen notes that the lumping together is misogynistic, denying each woman her own individual identity (“Feminization” 26).

⁴¹ As I shall argue, Jason’s facility with playing variously gendered roles as needed is part of what makes him treasonous, but his adoption of a feminized role in his seduction of Hipsipyle in no way impedes his seduction of

Aeneas, and the other men in the *Legend*, treasonous: deliberate deception via the portrayal of a hopelessly devoted man in love, and a complete lack of concern about the repercussions of such behavior. In Jason's case, the portrayals are more complicated because of his gender play, and the carelessness about consequences is heightened as Jason modulates and repeats his betrayal of one woman after another. As the narrator puts it, "There othere falsen oon, thow falsest two!" (1377).

Early in the legend, the primary relationships seem to be between men: first between the narrator himself and Jason, and then between Jason and his jealous uncle Pelias. In fact, this legend seems slightly unusual in that Jason dominates it, despite the title's focus on the women. Jason himself remains the focus throughout, not necessarily Hypsipyle or Medea. As Frank puts it, "Here was a chance to kill two birds with one stone, but the stone becomes more important than the birds" (82).⁴² In fact, this legend contains what may be the most complex relationship between narrator and villain. The Narrator starts in on Jason almost immediately, emphasizing Jason's single-minded plotting and love of enacting his deceptions:

Thow rote⁴³ of false lovers, Duc Jasoun,
Thow sly devourere and confusioun
Of gentil wemen, tendre creatures,
Thow madest thye recleymyng and thy lures

Medea, nor does he seem to be punished for it in any way. It is not his decision to play with gender roles that is the problem so much as his easy ability to do so, and do so well.

⁴² This is in itself a highly gendered way of explaining things—the masculine "stone" (testicle) killing the two "birds" (a common enough, if perhaps dated, term for women) seems to reflect the gender relations in the tale.

⁴³ Delaney notes that "rote" could mean penis (*Naked* 148). As mentioned in the previous chapter, there were fears that treason could be passed down through the bloodline in the Middle Ages; this is a connection Chaucer only sometimes chooses to exploit. As we will see, Hypermnestra mentions that Jason's children do not, in fact, inherit his treachery.

To ladyes of thy statly aparaunce,
and of thy wordes farced with plesaunce,
And of thy feyned trouthe and thy manere,
with thyn obesaunce and humble cheere
and with thy countrefeted peyne and wo. (1368-1376)

Jason is characterized as a monster, the women as helpless victims to his cannibalistic desires. Like Aeneas, Jason knows how to play the role of the devoted lover, offering “feyned trouthe,” “obesaunce,” and “countrefeted peyne and wo.” Chaucer’s use of “countrefeted” is particularly charged here, as counterfeiting was included as a part of the 1352 Treason Statutes. Seen as a direct threat to royal authority and control, counterfeiting was the only form of treason that did not entail the plotting of direct physical harm against the monarch, his family, or his officials. Comparing Jason’s behavior to counterfeit money thus works here not only to equate emotional with fiscal currency, but also to highlight the way both systems rely on trust. Currency only holds its value as long as all parties agree that it does—promises work in the same way. Moreover, counterfeiting must be planned out ahead of time; if Jason is counterfeiting his distress, he must have some plan in mind. From the start, Chaucer makes it clear that Jason’s treasons are just as calculated, and as fun, as Aeneas’s. In fact, Jason’s are worse.

Chaucer does not hesitate to charge Jason with his treasons—he brings them forward to the beginning of the legend, before the story has even begun. He accuses Jason of multiple deceptions, of faking his charming portrayals of true devotion when what he was really after was far less lofty:

O, often swore thow that thow woldest dye
For love, whan thow ne feltest maladye

Save foul delyt, which that thow callest love!
Yif that I live, thy name shal be shove
In English that thy sekte shal be knowe!
Have at thee, Jason! Now thyn horn is blowe!⁴⁴ (1378-1383)

While the pattern of charges may seem familiar, what is new here is the way in which the Narrator directly challenges the villain. The main focus in the beginning of the legend is on the relationship between the Narrator and Jason, and about each man's desire; this is about Jason's desire for "foul delyt," obviously, but also about the Narrator's desire to assign Jason the reputation he ought to have. Many critics see this as another way in which the poem focuses on men instead of the ostensible reason for the poem—the good women. Frank, for example, argues that Chaucer's "interest in Jason is another instance of the masculine preoccupation so prevalent in the Legend" (80). But this "masculine preoccupation" is complicated by the fact that what the narrator seeks to redress is not just the specific wrong done to two women in particular, Hipsipyle and Medea, but also to women in general each time Jason is allowed to get away with his predatory behavior. Jason has managed to keep his reputation as a hero without fully deserving it, and the narrator is attempting to regain control of the narrative and show his behavior for what it is, treason. Yet the fact remains that it is the narrator who trumpets the charge here, one more way in which Chaucer complicates any easy notions of gender's role in the tale. We hear very little from the women themselves.

Moreover, the story of Jason's treason against Hipsipyle (and by extension, Medea) is framed within the context of Jason's uncle Pelias plotting against him, a man

⁴⁴ Hornsby notes that this is likely a reference to the practice of "raising the hue and cry," a requirement for bringing any charges of felony (arson, rape, murder, treason) forward successfully (135).

betraying another man. Frank argues that this back story is out of place, that “The exposition involving Pelleas’ [sic] plot against Jason is too long for the tale of which it is a part. It gives us another false man, but it contributes almost nothing to either the theme of the false lover or the theme of woman betrayed” (91). However, this context is actually vital to the story and to the poem’s concern with betrayal in many ways. For one thing, it helps establish the language of treason in the poem as solid and consistent: men can betray men and women, the old can betray the young, and the powerful can betray those beneath them. Older conceptions of treason still privileged a mutual trust, despite the more rigid hierarchical statutory laws. This aspect of the legend, thus, works to equalize the definition of treason, to shift the focus to the intent and performance of betrayal no matter who the participants are. Unlike in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Chaucer highlights the difference in the behaviors of Calkas and Criseyde, here he keeps the presentation of treason relatively similar, whether it is familial betrayal or romantic, men against men, or men against women.

In fact, some of the most legally charged language of treason in the poem has to do with Uncle Pelias’s attempt to betray his nephew. Pelias spends his time plotting against Jason, described in the defining language of treason: “And in his wit a-nyght compassed he / How Jason myghte best destroyed be / withoute sclaunder of his compassement” (1414-1416). The repetition of forms of “compass” here emphasizes the legal context of Pelias’s plot; this is treasonous thinking. Interestingly, even here there is gender play; Pelias is plotting like a man, but is worried about his reputation like a woman. On the other hand, he also performs his deception by feigning devotion to Jason,

just like any of the male traitors who betray the women in the tales. Hoping to keep him from suspecting anything, “al made he to Jasoun soun / Gret chere of love and of affeccioun, / For drede lest his lorde it espide” (1420-1422). It is Pelias’s imagination, busied with paranoid daydreams about Jason overtaking his kingdom, which leads him to plot against Jason, the actual “compassment.” Pelias’s plotting places Jason in the role of the betrayed, which in this poem is the role of the woman. Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out that this position of powerlessness and victimization, typically the woman’s position, is where Jason finds himself; in fact, she argues, many of the men “are in the first place presented as characters caught up—like women—in the plots of other men, constrained by forces beyond their control and unable to rule their own destinies” (59). However, the men are always able to get out of these plots; Jason turns the tables in a way that the women do not. This has multiple valences; on the one hand, it may indicate that the men are smarter, stronger, simply more able to handle these stressful situations. Such a reading supports the argument that the *Legend*, despite its own claims to the contrary, is ultimately a misogynist work. On the other hand, by focusing on this imbalance, Chaucer is drawing attention to it. With his treatment of Jason, in particular, he suggests that this enhanced ability is a direct result of the disparity in fear of social repercussions.

Chaucer shows Jason’s treatment of Hipsipyle to be especially despicable both because it is unnecessary and because he brings in help. Jason has landed on Hipsipyle’s shores, and she offers her aid, “as was hire usaunce / To forthren every wight, and don plesaunce, / Of verrey bounte and of curteysye” (1476-78). He does not need to ensnare her heart in order to ensure his survival; she offers it freely. Yet Jason enlists Hercules’

help anyway. This is interesting for several reasons. For one, it is the only conspiracy in the *Legend*. The plan is “compassed on the nyght / Bytwexe hym Jason and this Ercules. / Of these two here was a shrewed lees” (1543-45). “Compassed” here highlights not only the legal language of treason, but also the anxiety about treasonous conspiracies running rampant in the late fourteenth century. Traitors did not come in the form of mere individual agents in 1380s England; they frequently came in packs. The Parliaments of 1386 and 1388 each resulted in multiple treason accusations, and the specter of the 1381 Uprising was never far away. The power of any “shrewed lees” increases exponentially with every conspirator added. Here, the conspiracy is gratuitous.

This is also a multi-layered example of Chaucer exploring gender roles. It is a masculine conspiracy to seduce Hipsipyle, forged between two men for the heterosexual gratification of one of them. Elaine Tuttle Hansen has argued that “In this poem, heterosexual union is clearly presented not as a good or even attainable end, but as a serious and even insuperable problem, a necessary yet perilous part of the quest for stable masculine identity and homosocial bonds between men” (“Feminization” 56). Hercules, in fact, enters the story solely in order to help Jason snare Hipsipyle. Interestingly, it is a feminized Jason that the two men construct. Playing his part in the deception, Hercules paints Jason as “agast / To love, and for to speke shamefast” (1534-35). At court, Jason “is as coy as is a mayde; / He loketh pitously, but nought he sayde” (1548-9).

Problematically, this act which seems to place Jason in the disadvantaged position of woman works to highlight the pervasive misogynistic conceptions of deceptive women in the Middle Ages. Hansen defines “feminized men” as “those who sometimes act as

women are said to act and who are treated as women are often treated” (3). It is, she posits, this feminization which makes him attractive to Hipsipyle in the first place: “the women in the poem who give themselves utterly to men are in fact attracted not by otherness and virility, but by the male’s temporary or apparent sameness, his passivity, coyness, vulnerability, and dependence” (7). He is also, in a sense, betraying his own gender to suit his own needs. Frank sees this passage as “truly comic” (87). But it has a fairly serious effect: their ruse works, suggesting that the possibly problematic sliding between genders that Jason performs is fine so long as there is a heterosexual goal. Jason’s deceptive gender play is not a betrayal in itself; it is a facet of the larger plot.

This is accentuated by the fact that, like Aeneas,⁴⁵ Jason acts as “any fals lovere” might (1554), “With feynyng, and with every subtil dede” (1556). He wins Hipsipyle and then leaves her; Chaucer shortens what must be almost two years, at the least, into a few lines. Jason

tok of hir substaunce
What so hym leste unto his purveyaunce;
And upon hire begat he children two,
And droght his sayl and saw hir nevere mo. (1560-63)

As Delaney argues, “Jason’s treatment of Hipsipyle is both an economic and a sexual betrayal” (*Naked* 144). This recalls his skills in counterfeiting; his ability to deceive brings him wealth, power, and sexual satisfaction.

Because of the legend’s focus on Jason, we hear only briefly from the betrayed woman herself. What she has to say complicates both our sympathies for her and how

⁴⁵ Like with Aeneas, the narrator doesn’t have time to explain the courtship: “As wolde God I leyser hadde and tyme / By process al his wowing for to ryme!” (1552-53).

we read Jason's next betrayal. Hipsipyle sends Jason a letter, in which she claims that their two children "ben lyk of alle thyng, ywis, / To Jason, save they coude nat begile" (1569-1570). The specific characteristic that they lack—the ability to "begile"—points right back to the performative aspects of romantic treason in the *Legend*. To beguile a person implies a deliberate deception, a conscious masking of the thoughts. It is what makes Fortune a traitor in *Troilus*. Here, as in *Troilus*, we see Chaucer electing to distance children from their treacherous parents.⁴⁶

More problematically, Hipsipyle also curses the woman Jason will take next, praying that she "Moste fynden hym untrew to hir also, / And that she moste bothe hire children spylle, / And alle tho that suffered hym his wille" (1573-1575). Thus, Jason's treatment of Medea, horrible though it is, is set in the context of Hipsipyle's prayer. Would he have treated her more honorably without the curse? The fact that Jason has already demonstrated his treacherous nature would indicate otherwise, but this does make it more difficult to determine the exact extent of his guilt. Thus Chaucer has the opportunity to tell another tale of Jason's betrayal, and paint him as a traitor, but he does not simultaneously paint a particularly flattering picture of a "good" woman. Interestingly, this is the only reference to Medea's murder of her children—Chaucer ignores the matter entirely in Medea's own legend. This is perhaps the most glaring instance of Chaucer editing his own text. Ruth M. Ames calls this "laundering" (66),⁴⁷

⁴⁶ But as we will see in the *Legend of Phyllis*, Chaucer also suggests that such a passing on of treasonous tendencies is possible, using Theseus and Demophon as proof.

⁴⁷ See her "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women" in *Chaucer in the Eighties*.

while Kiser goes a step further in labeling it “dishonest selectivity” (100).⁴⁸ But Mann argues that these changes are simply one more instance of Chaucer playing with the idea of literary authority: “There is no truth to be ‘misrepresented,’ only a series of poetic fictions, each with its own claims to authority” (30). Martin agrees, noting that “These stories were never neutral records of fact but, as far back as we can trace them, fraught with values, design and polemic” (206). Just as he invents “Lollius” as his authority for *Troilus*, and takes at will from both Ovid and Virgil’s versions of the Dido story, Chaucer chooses to brighten Medea’s reputation at the expense of Hipsipyle’s.

Jason’s betrayal of Medea is also presented in the context of treason as monstrous, but this time it is his masculinity which is emphasized. Now he is a “love devourer and dragoun” (1581), a bottomless well (1584) of deceptions who eats up not only the innocent women but the whole idea of love as well. Kiser notes that his “indiscriminate shape changing constitutes little more than deception” (113). He swears his devotion to her in a scene resplendent with feudal terms and the discourse of loyalty, at one point simply declaring that “Youre man I am, and lowely you beseche” (1626). This, as we have seen in *Troilus*, is the romantic, courtly love version of the feudal pledge. It also signals the different strategy he uses in his pursuit of Medea.

Whereas his ploy to snare Hipsipyle involved feminization, it is his manliness he employs to seduce Medea. There is no “coy...mayde” here; he will be her “man.”

Now was Jason a seemly man withalle,
And lyk a lord, and hadde a gret renoun,
And of his lok as real as a leoun,
And goodly of his speche, and familer,

⁴⁸ For a list of the major changes to the female characters’ stories, see Dinshaw’s *Poetics*, p. 75.

And coude of love al craft and are pleyner
Withoute bok, with everych observaunce. (1603-08)

It is his masculinity, his royal bearing and courtly manner that seduce Medea here, not his coyness and reticence. Once again, we see Chaucer presenting a Jason who can easily manipulate gender codes and behaviors, highlighting the constructed nature of such codes in the first place. Perhaps more interestingly, we see that Jason is in no way punished for crossing such gender lines. He is as successful at seducing Medea as he was at seducing Hipsipyle.

Once Jason has performed the role of courtly lover well enough, he and Medea come to an agreement that continues the legal language of bonding:

They been accorded ful bytwixe hem two
That Jason shal hire wedde, as trewe knyght;
And terme set to come sone at nyght
Unto hire chamber and make there his oth
Upon the goddess, that he for lef or loth
Ne sholde nevere hire false, nyght ne day,
To ben hire husbonde whil he lyve may. (1635-41)

They make an agreement, and Jason promises to be her “trewe knyght,” echoing both courtly and feudal language. Moreover, they set terms for the deal, and he swears an oath specifically stating that he will “nevere hire false, nyght ne day.” This is a clear example of Green’s claim that Chaucer “goes out of his way” to make the betrayal crystal clear, working on the popular notions of treason as an act of betraying a promise made between any two people. The lascivious nature of the deal is made obvious a few lines later when Chaucer tells us that Jason “doth his oth, and goth with hire to bedde” (1644). The juxtaposition of the oath and Medea’s bed is important for two reasons. On the one hand, as Hornsby notes, this is another example of a clandestine marriage: there is a promise of

consent and consummation (67). On the other hand, it also indicates the perfunctory nature of the oath for Jason; clearly it is merely a means to an end. Like Aeneas, he plays the part of the courtly lover perfectly without actually meaning anything he says.

Once again, Chaucer has shown us a male traitor who deliberately lies to women to get what he wants, gleefully transforms his behavior and performance as needed, and seems completely unconcerned about any damage done to the women or to his own reputation. Jason, like Aeneas, is most clearly labeled a traitor when he physically leaves Medea: “as a traytour he is from hire go” (1656). In case we have forgotten just why he is a “traytour,” Chaucer sums things up for us: “And falsly hath betrayed hire, allas, / As evere in love a chef traytour he was; / And wedded yit the thridde wif anon” (1658-60). There is a wry humor to the last line that nevertheless highlights the amazing callousness of Jason’s behavior. Ultimately, “of Jason this is the vasselage, / That in his dayes nas there non yfounde / So fals a loveire goinge on the grounde” (1667-69). Putting Jason’s behavior in strictly feudal terms is interesting in many ways. For one, he is quite possibly the worst vassal in history. But more interesting, it works to underscore just how serious the betrayal is. The romantic betrayal is equated with a feudal betrayal, both breaches of the most basic social units in medieval society. Jason exploits the trust inherent in the formation of these units. He deceives the women with any manipulation possible: of gender, of courtly behavior, or feudal ideals. Chaucer shows clearly that treason can involve exploiting any cultural code, any method by which people try to understand each other and form meaningful social bonds.

In the *Legends of Hipsipyle and Medea*, Chaucer explores the complicated intersections of different ideas of treason, and treason and gender, in the Middle Ages. This is made even thornier by the fact that, as Frank points out, Jason gets away with it: “What is most significant about the false lover, Chaucer perceived, is not that he is false, but that he is successful [...] Being false, he is undeserving, and so he should fail” (85). By forcing us to contemplate Jason’s success, simply by including both women in the “Legend,” Chaucer highlights why such an anxiety about treason exists in the first place. Treason frequently succeeds, at least for short periods of time, particularly in the Middle Ages. Drawing on the language of the 1352 Statutes as heavily as he does here, Chaucer evokes the treasons associated with *lèse-majesté*, against the king or other lord. But at the same time, Chaucer makes it clear that older, more common ideas of treason and betrayal are still in play as he shows Jason making promises to the women that he has no intention of keeping. Moreover, Chaucer employs multiple and sometimes conflicting depictions of gender behaviors here: men work both against and with each other; Jason performs both femininity and masculinity; the narrator himself seems intent on retribution for the betrayed women but does most of the talking himself; he lets Medea off the hook by ignoring her ultimate infanticides except for a thinly veiled reference put in the mouth of a suddenly vengeful Hipsipyle. It is a rich tale, which ultimately works to highlight not only the complexities of treason, but also the most basic aspect: broken trust. Jason cowers, boasts, acts like a woman, acts like a man, and ultimately makes promises to both Hipsipyle and Medea that he breaks without a second thought.

Theseus

All this talk of romantic betrayals, the Narrator tells us, “clepe ageyn unto memorye / Of Theseus the grete untrouthe of love” (1889-90). As with Aeneas and Jason, Theseus is shown to take advantage of a woman’s sympathy and help, promise to remain faithful to her, and ultimately leave her without a second thought. But whereas Aeneas and Jason seem unconcerned with any possible damage to their reputations should their actions become known, Theseus makes his promises of fidelity convincing precisely by flaunting the shame that would befall him if he were to betray Ariadne. While the Narrator makes a point to show Jason acting like a stereotypical courtly lady, he goes one step further with Theseus; he shows him thinking like a woman, like Iseut or Criseyde, aware of the damage to his reputation his treachery could do. But there is, of course, a major difference in repercussions of that knowledge; while such behavior can prove damning for a woman, such as Criseyde, it is merely a means to an end for a man, such as Theseus. Unlike any of the other male traitors in the poem, Theseus says exactly what could happen to him if his betrayal became common knowledge—and he were held accountable for it. However, he abandons Ariadne anyway, highlighting the different ways in which reputation works for and against men and women. In the *Legend of Ariadne*, Chaucer thus continues his examination of treason and gender, drawing a particularly brutal and cynical conclusion.

As with the *Legend of Hipsipyle*, the background of the *Legend of Ariadne* is full of treason itself. Before he even gets to Theseus, the Narrator tells the story of Minos, king of Crete. Minos is painted as unfeeling and cruel, letting the beautiful princess

Scylla drown, “drenche in sorwe and distress” (1919). As Chaucer has it, Scylla falls in love with Minos “For his beaute and for his chyvalrye” (1912) and simply “made Mynos wynnyn thilke place, / So that the cite was al at his wille” (1915-1916). Despite her grand gesture of love, “wikkedly he quitte hire kyndenesse” (1918). Minos is the ungrateful villain here, Scylla the innocent victim. The Narrator makes no comment on Scylla’s behavior or the fact that she has given the city to her father’s enemy, claiming that any more would be “to long as now for me” (1921). The original version places the villainy squarely on Scylla’s shoulders, however. Ovid tells the story in Book VIII of his *Metamorphoses*. Scylla betrays her father Nisus, and the city, when she falls in love with the enemy captain Minos. Minos rejects her, however, because he is disgusted by her betrayal. She is changed into a bird, forever pursued by her angry father, who has been changed into a hawk. Dinshaw argues that “Nisus’ daughter is made into another good woman, despite her treachery to her father” (*Poetics* 80); she sees this as another instance of Chaucer manipulating his sources to change the characterization of the women in the texts. Chaucer’s use of the Scylla story is intriguing; he could have left it out entirely. His choice to include the story but reverse the roles of hero and villain, creating a picture of feminine selflessness and masculine indifference when it is the opposite which holds in the original version, is striking. It does not, however, upset the whole balance of the poem, nor does it indicate that Chaucer is somehow devaluing the overall argument of the poem. Theseus will prove to be just as devious as Scylla; if men’s reputations can be varnished, why not women’s? In this legend in particular, the gendered imbalance of the power of reputation is a key factor.

Theseus is a prisoner, set to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. King Minos's daughters, Ariadne and Phaedra, overhear his laments and come up with a plan to help him escape. As Frank points out, Ariadne "does, in a sense, betray her father" by depriving him of his captive enemy (118). It would also have been seen as treason by the Statutes of 1352; Ariadne is adhering to the king's enemy, what modern law would consider sedition. Ariadne herself seems to consider this later in the tale, concluding that "My thynketh no wight oughte us herof blame, / Ne beren us therefore an evil name" despite the fact that they are helping a prisoner escape (2134-5). There seem to be echoes of the Scylla and Nysus story here, though on a lesser scale. Delaney goes one step further and suggests that Ariadne not only betrays her father, but her half-brother the Minotaur, too, robbing him of his victim, Theseus (*Naked* 212). But these implicit betrayals are left unspoken in the tale. What Chaucer does focus on is the explicit treachery of Theseus. Somewhat problematically, it turns out that while the idea of escaping seems to be Ariadne's (1984), the bulk of the plan comes from Phaedra (1985-2024).⁴⁹ Although it could be argued that this is a mitigating factor in Theseus's decision to abandon Ariadne for Phaedra—he owes some gratitude to her, too—ultimately, it is Ariadne to whom Theseus makes his promise, and it is Ariadne who watches him break it.

Theseus's promises of love and devotion to Ariadne border on the ridiculous, as many critics have pointed out. But what is most interesting here is the sheer audacity of his promises of love and servility being given in the same breath as his boasts about his

⁴⁹ See Frank, 114; Percival, 178.

ability to deceive *and* his imagined punishment for betrayal. After hearing the plan to set him free, he promises Ariadne that

I wol nat twynne,⁵⁰ after this aventure,
But in youre servise thus I wol endure,
That, as a wreche unknowe, I wol yow serve
For evermo, til that myn herte sterve.
Forsake I wol at hom myn heritage,
And, as I seyde, ben of youre court a page. (2032-37)

He will not leave her; he will lower himself, “endure,” to serve her forever as an anonymous page. This is a clear pledge of faithfulness, though as yet there is no romantic tinge to it. The weight of the promise comes in the sacrifice of his name, his status, his “heritage.” When Ariadne declares that he must swear his loyalty, “upon al that may be sworn” (2102), he agrees.

Moreover, he now claims that he has been in love with her for a long time, and has been her “servaunt” in love for seven years (2120). As Ames points out, this declaration comes off “Almost as an afterthought,” since “the reader has been given no indication of prior acquaintance” (68). The timeline within the poem up until this point indicates that everything has been happening on the same day. Frank argues that this is not merely an afterthought, but an example of Theseus’s outright lies: “It is the first anyone has heard of this, and if Chaucer had meant us to believe it, he would have prepared us for it” (124). Whether Ariadne ought to believe such nonsense is almost

⁵⁰ Dinshaw, in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, links this to the “clewe of twyn” that Ariadene gives him which helps him escape (78). She explains that women’s bodies were equated with labyrinths, and in this case “Woman has the ‘clewe’ to the labyrinth, she knows the secrets not only of her own body, but also of the labyrinth that is a text” (79). Dinshaw argues that the women seem to know the secrets here, of body/labyrinth/text, but they must be “*passed through*” (79 her italics).

beside the point; the important thing is that Theseus has sworn to stay with her and serve her “for evermo,” declaring that “now have I yow, and also have ye me” (2121).

Ironically, this plan will only work because, as Theseus himself boasts, he is such a good actor. He promises that he can act his way through anything:

So slyly and so wel I shal me gye,
And me so wel disfigure and so lowe,
That in this world ther shal no man me knowe,
To han my lyf, and for to han presence
Of yow, that don to me this excellence. (2045-49)

No one will recognize him, he claims, because he is a master of disguise and can mimic the behavior of those beneath him. This skill at dissembling is one which all the male traitors in the *Legend* share. It is one of the basic aspects of treason, in fact—*secretly* harboring malicious thoughts about supposed allies is far more invidious than harboring them *openly*. Part of what the *Legend* as a whole has to say about gender politics, in fact, has to do with showing that the men are just as capable (in Jason’s case, perhaps doubly so) of lying and scheming as medieval misogyny would have everyone believe women are. But no one is as disarmingly open about it as Theseus is here. While it should be a huge warning sign, an amazingly clear signal that she should not believe anything he says, Theseus uses this declaration of his ability to lie, to pretend, to “gye,” to convince Ariadne to trust him.

Not only is he boldly open about his enthusiasm for and ability at lying, but Theseus is also seemingly attuned to what would happen to his reputation⁵¹ should he

⁵¹ Hagedorn points out that Theseus had a disturbing reputation for his dealings with women already; having abducted Helen and Proserpine earlier in his life, he “has a habit of raping, ravishing or otherwise carrying off women” (84). This would seem, thus, to be one instance of Chaucer not trying to paint his villain in the worst possible light—an inversion, in a way, of his treatment of Aeneas earlier.

renege on any of his promises. This insight, though, like his recognition of his skill at performing, is something he uses to manipulate Ariadne into trusting him. Sounding more like Iseut or Criseyde than any of the male traitors, Theseus ruminates on the disastrous effect a betrayal would have on his honor and reputation. In a long and telling passage, he claims that

But I yow serve as lowly in that place,
I preye to Mars to yeve me swich a grace
That shames deth on me ther mote falle,
And deth and poverte to my frendes alle;
And that my spirit by nyghte mote go,
After my deth, and walke to and fro,
That I mote of traytour have a name,
For which my spirit go, to do me shame!
And if every cleyme other degree,
But if ye vouche-sauf to yeve it me,
As I have seyde, of shames deth I deye!
And mercy, lady! I can nat elles seye. (2062-73).

This is a rich and complicated section, a negative promise that is hyperbolic in its scope of punishment. The most glaring part of this speech, or at least the cheekiest, is Theseus's own admission that if he does not keep his word, he "mote of traytour have a name." As David Wallace suggests, "Theseus here proposes that any future betrayal of Ariadne on his part be condemned as a political crime" (111). Theseus *knows* that betraying her will make him a traitor; he acknowledges that he is making a promise and that breaking that promise should ruin his reputation. Furthermore, he offers his friends as pledges of his loyalty, dooming them to "deth and poverte" should he fail.⁵²

⁵² Theseus is offering "compurgators" here; these were people of good standing in the community who would stand as pledges for legal claims. See Hornsby, 56-57; Green 100-105.

To be fair, he condemns himself to death, too, a shameful death, and he declares that even his ghost will pay the price of his betrayal, “by nyghte mote go” and “walke to and fro.” He is claiming to offer his eternal damnation as proof of his veracity and sincerity. This is, he seems to say, only right; this is what should happen to someone who would dare to betray such a promise to his benefactress. But as Chaucer makes clear, this whole passage is a carefully constructed lie. In fact, there is something of a clue here in the fact that Theseus frames this whole declaration as a prayer to Mars, who is not above a bit of romantic betrayal himself. But Theseus continues to pile on the lies in a perfect parody of the grateful lover.

After this declaration of punishments to come, he swears to be true to his word with similar promises of horrible consequences should he fail: “‘Ye, lady myn,’ quod he, ‘or ellis torn / Mote I be with the Mynotaur to-morwe!’” (2103-04). Hagedorn argues that given Theseus’s treatment of Ariadne, “The sign of the Minotaur—bestial man and mannish beast—ironically becomes a fitting symbol for its conqueror” (101). But what is more interesting here is that he is attuned to the possibility of punishment for lying, for falseness. Like Iseut, he swears on the basis of violence if he lies. Unlike Iseut, though, he faces no real danger of falling prey to that violence once Ariadne sets him free.

Ironically, Theseus is true to his word, in the most devastating way possible to Ariadne. He is, in fact, an excellent liar and performer. After convincing her of his love and faithfulness, agreeing to her plan to marry once they reach his homeland, Theseus

orders the ships to stop on an island, decides that Phaedra is prettier than the sister to whom he has promised himself,⁵³ and leaves Ariadne alone on a wild island:

Whan Adryane his wif aslepe was,
For that hire syster fayrer was than she,
He taketh hire in his hond and forth goth he
To shipe, and as a traytour stal his wey,
Whil that this Adryane aslepe lay. (2171-75)

Delaney argues that Theseus is “as problematic a hero as Aeneas,” and the two do share similar stories (*Naked* 208). Like Aeneas, he steals away while his “wif” sleeps. Like Aeneas, he is condemned at this point in the narrative “as a traytour.” Hallissy sees this “skulking off in the dead of night” (29) as a function of “avoiding confrontational scenes in which anger might surface” (29). The women have to be contained, restrained from demonstrating anger.

Ariadne’s reaction to her betrayal has provoked an interesting array of critical response. While many seem to find it genuinely moving, one of the few scenes in which there is no comedy or parody,⁵⁴ others find it a frustrating representation of female passivity in the poem. Upon hearing Theseus boast initially about his deceptive abilities, Ariadne declares that she cannot help “But send yow grace of herte and sleyghte also” (2084). Ironically, she is wishing him the power of “sleyghte,” wishing for him to be able to deceive, completely unaware that she is the person whom he is deceiving. When she wakes up alone on the island, groping for him in the bed, she recognizes his treachery:

⁵³ Wallace considers this “the deliberate destruction of sisterhood” (104).

⁵⁴ Frank is an exception here: “someone has been reading too many romances” (126).

‘Allas,’ quod she, ‘that ever I was wrought!
I am betrayed!’ and hire her torente,
And to the stonde barefoot faste she wente,
And cryed, ‘Theseus, myn herte swete!
Where be ye, that I may nat with yow mete,
And myghte thus with bestes ben yslayn?’ (2187-92)

Martin considers this “one of the few unambiguously poignant scenes of the Legend” (208), and Hagedorn argues that “by the end of the tale, the gentle comedy turns to genuine pathos” (96). Edgar Shannon points out that “the idea that the hero’s debt of gratitude to the heroine adds to the guilt of his betrayal is stronger in the case of Theseus than in that of any of the other heroes Chaucer mentions” (66).⁵⁵ Aeneas, Jason, and Demophon all need help to some degree, but only Theseus is facing imminent death. If “the greater the debt of gratitude owed, the more heinous the treason,” then Theseus may be the worst traitor in the poem.⁵⁶

Not every critic sees this poignancy having the same effect, however. We may pity Ariadne in her plight, but as Ames points out, “Pity, however, is not respect; the only dignity the deluded women have is in their death” (71). While she recognizes that Theseus has betrayed her, Ariadne’s *ubi sunt* is more plaintive than angry; despite his ostentatious promises of punishment for treachery, Ariadne does not hold him to any of them. Hallissy notes that “When a betrayed woman complains, the term means a

⁵⁵ See his *Chaucer and the Roman Poets*. New York: Russell and Russell, Incorporated, 1964.

⁵⁶ Yet, as many critics have noted, Theseus has a sparkling reputation elsewhere in Chaucer’s own work, in “The Knight’s Tale.” Wallace suggests that this multiplicity is allowed to Theseus in direct contradiction to a female character like Criseyde. Whereas she is (rightly) horrified at what her reputation will be, “Theseus harbors no such fears: he conquers the world; he commissions the books and paintings; he has more than only ‘lyf.’ He controls, in short, the means and occasions of artistic production and the circulation of texts” (111).

planctus, a lament or self-pitying speech, not a forthright demand for male reform” (29).

For Lynn Arner, this reaction is emblematic of the fate of all the women in the text: “the tales testify that women who act on their desires destroy their own happiness” (74).⁵⁷ For her, Chaucer is showing the dangers inherent for women who decide against following traditional rules and roles for women. Arner argues, “In the *Legend of Good Women*, most leading ladies initially show considerable agency, flouting paternal and societal restrictions. However, once men betray them, these women are largely sapped of the ability to act” (73-74). This is only marginally fair here, since Ariadne is trapped on an island and there is not a whole lot she can do to help herself.

Theseus’s treason is thus more complex than Aeneas’s, and in many ways is similar to Jason’s, particularly in terms of stemming from victimization at the hands of another man. Both are rescued by two women, and both demonstrate a willingness to play with gender roles. In fact, Theseus is in a slightly more disadvantaged position than either Aeneas or Jason since he does not even have the benefit of physically performing his deceptions, playing the perfect courtly lover, whether feminized or masculinized. Theseus has to rely on his words alone, and is able to use them to say exactly what he means while still deceiving his rescuer. In the most perilous situation of all the men, Theseus is also the most cavalier about his deception. He makes ridiculous oaths and flaunts his deceptions, and he leaves his woman to die alone.

⁵⁷ See her “Trust No Man but Me: Women and Chaucer’s Shorter Poetry” in *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde and the Shorter Poems*.

Demophon

“The Legend of Phyllis” comes after “The Legend of Ariadne,” and this placement is crucial as the narrator repeatedly assures us that everything we need to know about Demophon has already been presented in the earlier depiction of his father, Theseus, and his treatment of Ariadne. “The Legend of Phyllis” is striking in its initial insistence on the hereditary basis for Demophon’s treasonous actions. Hansen states that the tale “seems solely aimed at illustrating” this idea of heritable treason (*Fictions* 26). But focusing on this to the exclusion of the rest of the tale is a mistake. For one, as explained in the previous chapter, treason and heredity were linked in cultural and legal thought in very real ways in the Middle Ages. For another, the repeated declarations of similarity between Theseus and Demophon work, ultimately, to efface Demophon himself; it is Phyllis who shines in this tale, who has the most distinctive voice. In an inversion of the way in which Jason dominates the Legends of Hipsipyle and Medea, here, the focus is on the woman.

Florence Percival argues that the tale “opens with a flippant allusion to the inherited and instinctual aspect of masculine depredations on women and ends with Chaucer’s humorous acknowledgement of his own position in this illustrious lineage” (284).⁵⁸ For those reading the poem as one long comic exercise, this may seem a logical position to take. The last line, in which Chaucer advises women to “trusteth, as in love, no man but me,” is a sly nod to the fact that the poet in question is under self-imposed charges of treason himself (2561). However, I would argue that Phyllis’s story is in many

⁵⁸ See her *Chaucer’s Legendary Good Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

ways the most powerful of the seduction tales in the *Legend*, and these seemingly “flippant” illusions to hereditary treason play a large role in its resonance. Frank points out that this idea does not originate with Chaucer, but with Ovid: “Chaucer stresses this (as did his source) for all it is worth. Like father, like son. Philandering and betrayal are asserted to run in the blood” (147). However, as I have suggested, this idea echoes a wider cultural anxiety about treason and heredity in the Middle Ages. The families of traitors could be treated harshly: Bellamy points out that in France, the children of traitors could be killed,⁵⁹ and in England they could be disinherited by the King (13). Clearly there was a fear about how easily treasonous ideals could be spread, particularly in the family, and Chaucer highlights this in his depiction of Theseus and Demophon.

In fact, as the legend goes on, it begins to seem as if Demophon, a “second-generation womanizer” in Dinshaw’s words (85), can be described *only* in relation to Theseus. The Narrator argues that both common sense and authority agree “That wiked fruit cometh of a wiked tre” (2395). The biblical echoes are clear; the traitorous apple does not fall far from the traitorous tree. In the same way that the Narrator emphasizes Aeneas’s performance as a faithful lover through repetition, he underlines Demophon’s treachery through repeating his relationship with his father. In fact, he says, “In love a falsher herde I nevere non, / But if it were his fader Theseus” (2399-2400). The father-son link becomes a kind of shorthand for discussing betrayal: “At shorte wordes, right so Demophon / The same wey, the same path hath gon, / That did his false fader Theseus”

⁵⁹ He explains: “The argument was that the crime of treason was so horrible that the traitor’s offspring were contaminated by his misdeed and ought to be punished with him” (13). There is no evidence of such punishments being carried out in England.

(2462-64).⁶⁰ The rest goes without saying, the Narrator suggests. However, it actually works to expand his discussion of treason, both by forcing a reconsideration of the all the myriad forms of betrayal within the *Legend* and of how easily such monstrous behavior can be spread.

But “The Legend of Phyllis” is more interesting for another reason, too: here, at least, Phyllis gets the last word. Whereas in previous tales we hear the narrator describe the men’s behavior, here he lets Phyllis describe it herself. Dinshaw points out that this is still ultimately in the hands of the male narrator, who “will report only what he considers well put by Phyllis in her letter to her false lover” (83).⁶¹ But at the same time, this would indicate that some of what Phyllis says is indeed “well put.” In hindsight, Phyllis can see what happened—telling the tale herself brings her closer to the birds of the prologue than any other heroine. We hear more from Phyllis herself, in the form of her angry letter to Demophon, than we do from any other heroine in the tale.⁶² And what she tells him encapsulates what is so devastating about treason: the performance of love that hides its own selfishness while eliciting the trust of the unsuspecting. Phyllis recognizes the problem:

‘To much truste I, wel may I pleyne,
Upon youre lynage and youre fayre tonge,

⁶⁰ Demophone is “lyk his fader of face and of stature, / And fals of love, it com hym of nature” (2446-2447).

⁶¹ She cites 2516-17 here: “Here and ther in rym I have it layd, / There as me thoughte that she well hath sayd.” The point is well-taken that the narrator still has a hand in editing her words, but these lines also indicate that these are Phyllis’s words in the first place. Moreover, it is still more than we hear from any other heroine.

⁶² Kiser wryly suggests that this is an oversight by Chaucer, who has “managed to let Phyllis’s voice dominate her own legend” (12-121).

And on youre teres falsly out yronge.
How coulde ye wepe so by craft?' quod she.
'May there swiche teres feyned be?' (2525-2529)

And this crystallizes the basis of why treason creates such anxiety, at any level.

Relationships, whether between friends, lovers, vassal and lord, or subject and king, are built on trust, on layers of assumptions that people say what they mean, and act on what they genuinely feel. But Demophon, like Aeneas, Jason, and his own father, is able to lie at will.⁶³ Having depended on her for sustenance, and having “piked of hire al the good he myghte,” Demophon has convinced Phyllis that he loves her (2467). When he tells her, therefore, that he will return in one month to marry her (2472-77), she believes him. He is an excellent performer; he can speak love, and weep on command. Anything can be fabricated, manipulated. The innocent Phyllis of the past did not understand this, but, in hindsight, a wiser Phyllis can see the falseness of the whole thing. Moreover, it is not the woman who is performing, deceiving; Phyllis’s epiphany—that men can and do use their bodies and words to feign, to act, to manipulate— elucidates Chaucer’s work in the poem to problematize easy links between gender and treason.

More importantly, Phyllis is outraged enough to want this to be recorded. Unlike many of the earlier heroines in the poem, she is not willing to go down without a fight. Fittingly, she wants this to hit Demophon where it will hurt most—and where she was duped in the first place—his family and reputation. In a long, angry passage, she lists how she would turn the tables:

⁶³ He is also, like the other three, in desperate need of help. Demophon arrives on her shores “Wayk, and ek wery, and his folk forpynd / Of werynesse, and also enfamynd, / That to the deth he almost was ydriven” (2428-2430).

And whan thyne olde auncestres peynted be,
In which men may here worthynesses se,
Thanne preye I God thow peynted be also
That folk may rede forby as they go,
'Lo! This is he that with his flaterye
Bytraised hath and don hire vilenye
That was his trewe love in thought and dede!
But sothly, of oo point yit may they rede,
That ye ben lyk youre fader as in this,
For he begiled Adreaine, ywis,
With swich an art and with switch subtilte
As thow thyselven hast begyled me.
As in that point, althogh it be nat fayr,
Thow folwest hym, certain, and art his ayr. (2536-2549; italics mine).

Her present and future are ruined; she wants to ruin not just his future, but his past, to get revenge on the bloodline which caused his treason. Importantly, she states clearly that she wants “men” to be able to see what really happened. Phyllis was “trewe” to him in both “thought and dede,” in a way that none of the bad men in the legends are to the women they deceive. The repetition in the passage is also noteworthy; she uses “begiled”/ “begyled” twice, recalling the description of Jason and Hercules’s plot against Hipsipyle. This is an ugly trait, “nat fayr” in any sense of the word. However, as she cannot undo the wrong done to her, she chooses to fight back in the realm of reputation, of honor, of public standing. She assumes, as does Criseyde before her, that posterity will be the harshest critic. And as Kiser points out, “Like Criseyde, Phyllis realizes that her literary future is likely to hold a far worse betrayal of her than could be caused by any unfaithful man” (123). So Phyllis chooses to be proactive, to tell her version of the story in an attempt to take back some of the control she has lost.

Her wish to literally rewrite the wrongs done suggests that all the emphasis in the tale on the idea of hereditary treason is not a joke, but a key part of the fight for equal

justice. Theseus's reputation *should* have been stained by his treatment of Ariadne; he *should* have been punished for his treachery. Romantic betrayals should count against a man's reputation just as they do against a woman's. Instead, he and his line were allowed to flourish. When people view paintings of Demophon, she wants them to privilege not his heroic deeds, battles fought, lands won—she wants them to see and weigh his “flattery” and “vilenye.” Dinshaw points out that she, like the Wife of Bath, envisions a world in which what is done to women is just as important as what men have done to men (83). She argues that these wishes, however, “remain in the conditional” (83). Along the same lines, Cox posits that Chaucer has done a disservice to women in the *Legend*, “not only valorizing the necessity of women's suffering but seemingly absolving men of responsibility as well” (53). But I would argue that here we see the opposite in Phyllis's realization that her suffering was needless. It may ultimately be futile; the letter is written as she prepares to commit suicide. But Phyllis can at least imagine a space, a time, in which men and women are held to the same standards of behavior. It is telling that the center of this space is the idea of loyalty, faith, and truth in love; treason was the greatest crime in the Middle Ages and was therefore the most appropriate site for the challenge.

Conclusions

The unfinished nature of the *Legend of Good Women* adds to its mystery, leaving open the debate about Chaucer's intentions for the poem. But examining the poem in terms of what it has to say about treason suggests that those intentions were serious. The poem is enveloped in layers of discussion about treason and betrayal; it claims to have

been called into being by the treacherous actions of a woman, Criseyde, and her poet, Chaucer. But Chaucer expands and develops this context of treason in romance in the *Legend*, in ways that require several examples of relationships to explain. There are, of course, necessary similarities to the tales and the male villains in them. The men who betray in the *Legend* are shown to be skilled performers, smooth talkers, men for whom the chase, the deception, is just as pleasurable as the conquest. And once they have committed the betrayal, once they have established their identities as traitors, they simply move on, leaving the women stuck. They commit treason with impunity, unconcerned with the effects of their behavior.

But as much I have endeavored to elucidate this pattern in the tales, I do not wish to reduce the tales to their similarities. Treason, as Chaucer shows, takes many forms and depends on an ability to understand and mimic cultural codes, and it intersects with deeply held ideas in the Middle Ages about gender. Chaucer employs various terms which evoke both legal and cultural ideas of treason and betrayal, from Pelias “compassing” against Jason, to Jason “counterfeiting” his love, to all of the men promising to be “trewe” to the women. The fact that the men are all deceivers, all liars, is perhaps Chaucer’s way of counteracting the pervasive medieval idea that deception was the specialty of women; as the Prologue claims, it is also Chaucer’s way of counteracting what was seen as (though I would argue this is a misinterpretation) his own earlier depiction of a deceptive woman, Criseyde.

However, the representations of treason in the poem cannot be narrowed down so easily. The men are portrayed as villains, but at the same time, they all have already

gotten away with their treasons. This seems to be the sticking point for many critics. Hallissy suggests that Chaucer “sees women’s instinctive need to help, their intuitive understanding of men’s needs, their positive genius for self-sacrifice...not as the behavior manual writer or homilist would do, as virtues, but rather as psychological handicaps putting them at a disadvantage in dealing with the more rapacious members of the opposite sex” (34). But the poem is, I have maintained, a way of trying to right those wrongs, using language and literature to taint the men’s reputations in the same way that they have tainted the women’s. Whether it works perhaps depends on how one views the poem. Cox argues that the women in the tales “are twice victimized: first in their situation of origin and second in the *Legend* narrator’s re-telling, which reinforces the cultural codes that made possible, indeed inevitable, the original victimization” (54). But if we return to the Prologue, having looked now at the tales which follow it, it seems clear that we should take this discussion seriously. Betrayal was a crucial problem in the Middle Ages, even for the natural world. Treason was happening everywhere, in myriad ways. The Prologue suggests that while the treason cannot be erased, or wished away, it can be dealt with by bringing it out into the open and trying to move on. The tales, however, remind us that treason does not always bring the punishment it deserves. The birds in the Prologue can move on; the women in the tales cannot.

At the end of the *Legend’s* G Prologue, Alceste asks the narrator: “Why noldist thow han writyn of Alceste / And latyn Criseide ben aslepe and reste?” (530-531). The same question could be asked for the *Legend* itself: why bring Criseyde up just to shame her again? The answer seems to be that Chaucer realized that he had more to say about

romantic betrayal and treason. Chaucer has devoted tale after tale in the *Legend* to an exploration of male betrayal, underlining the horror and multifaceted nature of the crime. The men are premeditated liars, actors who can walk the walk and talk the talk of both courtly and feudal ideals. Aeneas, Jason, Theseus, and Demophon are monsters who perpetuate a cycle of treason by counterfeiting love, and thereby devaluing it. Judging by the *Legend's* treatment of treason, Criseyde must, to a certain degree, be exonerated from the charges leveled against her. She does not feign her love; she does not knowingly deceive Troilus until the very end of the poem; and she most certainly is not as callous as the men in the *Legend* are. If we look at the poem not just as parody, or irony, we see that Chaucer utilizes a combination of legal language and performance tropes to construct a politically relevant nexus of literary romantic treason. If we look at the poem in this way, maybe we can finally let Criseyde “reste.”

Chapter Five

Malory and the “Grete Worde”

Treason is not just a prevalent theme in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, but a constant force against which knights and ladies, kings and queens, must react.¹ My discussion here focuses primarily on the romantic traitors in the text: Lancelot, who betrays his feudal lord and king, and Guinevere, who betrays her husband and king. Their affair, and the devastation which its revelation brings, is the focus of the two final books of the *Morte*, and it plays a major role in the fall of Arthur’s kingdom. However, theirs is not the only betrayal to contribute to the end of Camelot; the text is concerned with treason, both great and small, from beginning to end. Their adultery is only one facet; Mordred’s political rebellion, Gawain’s refusal to exonerate Lancelot for the accidental death of his brothers, and even Arthur’s own handling of the laws and men of his kingdom all play their part. Yet all of these, in addition to the more general problems of human weakness and divided loyalties, are connected to treason in some form or another. It is, as Deborah Ellis has pointed out, “contagious” within the text (68).² Once characters have been touched by treason, whether as victims or as challengers, they are, typically, caught in a cycle from which there is no real escape. Swearing never to do treason is part

¹ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. 3rd ed., 3 vols. Ed Eugene Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. All references and citations are to this edition, with both page and line numbers noted for greatest clarity. I have also consulted Chrétien de Troyes’ *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart*. Trans. Ruth Harwood Cline. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990; the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*. Ed. Larry D. Benson, rev. Edward E. Foster. *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994. Web. 15 Sep. 2011; and relevant passages of the French Vulgate or *Lancelot-Grail* cycle from *The Lancelot-Grail Reader: Selections from the Medieval French Arthurian Cycle*. Ed. Norris J. Lacy. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.

² See her “Balin, Mordred, and Malory’s Idea of Treachery.” *English Studies* 68 (1987): 66-74.

of the oath which binds the knights of the Round Table, and thus the problem of treason is built into the cultural fabric of Malory's Arthurian world.

There is, of course, deep irony in the fact that a text so concerned with treason should have been written by a man suspected of treason himself—along with a host of crimes, including rape,³ which is another prevalent theme in the text (Riddy 4).⁴ As David Wallace points out, “Some critics struggle to reconcile such a rapsheet with a text so focused on ‘worship’: they want their Malory to be more like the *Morte*'s Launcelot and less like its Gawain” (“Malory” 231).⁵ Thomas Malory was himself a member of the gentry who would have enjoyed many of the aristocratic pastimes that the knights in the *Morte* enjoy. He was, thus, like many of his fellows, caught up in the whirlwind politics of the fifteenth century, changing allegiances as necessary. As Field points out, Malory enjoyed the support of the Duke of Buckingham for years, only to turn around and take part in an ambush against the Duke's men in 1450 (95-96). He supported, alternately, both the Lancastrian and Yorkist causes (Riddy 2). This changing of sides, however, did not help his legal woes, and he spent most of the 1450s, as Field notes, “in London prisons” (112). The bulk of the *Morte* was written in 1469-1470, while Malory was in jail (Riddy 1). This may help to explain, in part, both his interest in writing about an idealized

³ P.J.C. Field, in his study of the life of Malory, argues that “*Raptus* could mean simple abduction, but in this case the wording of the charge shows it did not: the charge was sexual assault” (97). My discussion of Malory's life draws heavily on Field, including his designation of the author of the *Morte* as Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. See his *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993.

⁴ I have also found Felicity Riddy's work on Malory helpful; see her *Sir Thomas Malory*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987.

⁵ For a brief but thorough overview of Malory and the *Morte*, see his “Sir Thomas Malory” in the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature*. Ed. Larry Scanlon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

English past and his focus within the story on the way that divided loyalties and legal chaos participate in problematizing it at the same time. As Riddy notes, “It is difficult to avoid finding a contemporary implication in Malory’s choice of the romance version of the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom, which inevitably details, as the chronicle version does not, an English king’s loss of French allegiance and the internal devastation that follows on that loss” (146).

However, while an understanding of fifteenth-century legal and cultural thought regarding treason is necessary for a full appreciation of what Malory does with treason in the text, I do not wish to argue that Malory is simply cutting and pasting contemporary legal and cultural dilemmas onto the *Morte*. In this, I agree with Elizabeth T. Pochoda that “To read *Le Morte Darthur* as a political allegory of contemporary conditions is to miss the really significant issues of the book” (27).⁶ Malory’s own constant need to explain the different legal processes of Arthur’s kingdom shows how futile such an approach would be. Yet these very differences obviously force the reader to think about the fifteenth-century state of things. Moreover, Malory is not working with an original story. He is drawing on a whole history of Arthurian stories and traditions. His main sources seem to have been two fourteenth-century English texts, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, and the thirteenth-century French vulgate cycle of the prose romances. The adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinvere, of course, is the

⁶ She points out that “He constantly uses the phrase “in tho dayes” to indicate that he is examining the story as an historical ideal and is not trying to pass his book off as an allegorical record of his own times” (59). See her *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971. This is also the stance Field takes (123); Wallace takes a similar point of view, arguing that “the viability of roman-A-clef historicism” is suspect (“Imperium” 46). See his “Imperium, Commerce, and National Crusade: The Romance of Malory’s *Morte*.” *New Medieval Literatures* 8 (2006): 45-65.

primary focus of Chrétien's twelfth-century version of the story. The context of the stories, therefore, sometimes harks back to earlier feudal France, making the text of his *Morte* an amalgamation of hundreds of years and two continents worth of legal and cultural traditions. This chapter, therefore, examines the points of intersection and contention between the text's portrayal of what treason is and how it functions and what treason meant during the fifteenth century in England, all the while keeping in mind that the meaning of treason shifts constantly.

One of the primary treasons in the text is Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery. That is, their affair is clearly seen as treason within the *Morte*, despite the fact that the legal status of adultery as a crime in the fifteenth century is dubious. As I have argued, a queen's adultery was plainly a crime in earlier time periods across Europe. Béroul's Iseut, we have seen, is brought to the stake for the crime of treasonous adultery. The fact that she escapes does not change the legal status of the accusation. However, adultery was not a civil crime in England in the Middle Ages; it was a matter for the ecclesiastical courts. Even the adultery of a queen was a murky legal area: the 1352 Statute deemed it treason for someone other than the king to have sex with the queen, but the crime is clearly that of the male partner.⁷ The Statute says nothing about the guilt of the queen; it does not even admit the possibility of a willing affair. I will defer a full discussion of adultery's relation to treason in the text until later in the chapter. But here, it is enough to note, with

⁷ It is the second clause of the Statute: "to defile the king's wife or his eldest unmarried daughter or his eldest son's wife" (Pollock and Maitland 502, n. 6; citing *25 Edw. III* 5.2).

others, that “No English queen was charged with treasonous adultery until Anne Boleyn” (Cherewatuk 50).⁸

Yet the focus of the last two books of Malory’s text, and indeed the focus of the end of this chapter, is on the multiple trials for Guinevere’s treason, twice for adultery. Here, we see echoes of the earlier feudal practices that are inherent in Malory’s French sources. Robert L. Kelly has dubbed this part of Malory’s “invented treason laws” (117).⁹ Within Malory’s text, adultery seems to be a criminal offense, but it is a criminal offense in which two major characters participate without, for most of the text, a shred of compunction. As Catherine Batt notes, “‘Knowledge’ of adultery destabilizes, and yet is intrinsic to, our position as readers, and the loss of security about perspectives and categories heightens awareness that moral and judicial problems are intractable” (167).¹⁰ Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Malory refuses to condemn the pair of lovers in part by refusing to narrate the scenes of adultery, with one important exception, and also by presenting each of the lovers as ideal despite their transgression. Cherewatuk explains that “the Malorian narrator rarely addresses marriage, sexual mores, or adultery, and when he waxes eloquent about romantic love, he is at his most inconsistent” (xv). A simple comparison of contemporary laws to text is, thus, a necessary first step, but by

⁸ Cherewatuk does point out that there were adultery rumors circulating about both Henry VI’s wife, Margaret of Anjou, and Edward IV’s wife, Elizabeth Wydeville (27). See her *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory’s Morte Darthur*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006.

⁹ See his “Malory and the Common Law: *Hasty judgement* in the ‘Tale of the Death of King Arthur.’” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 22 (1995): 111-140.

¹⁰ *Malory’s Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

itself an ultimately insufficient way to examine the valences of adultery and treason in the *Morte*.

One of the other reasons Malory's text is so important to a discussion of treason is that it complicates the intersections of treason and gender that I have been discussing in previous texts. Here, it is not only, or even primarily, the female character that it is accused of adultery and treason, or who is anxious about status and reputation because of those accusations. Unlike the men in *The Legend of Good Women*, who never seem to give a second thought to the consequences of their romantic betrayals, or Tristran, who worries only once about the damage his relationship with Iseut has done to his reputation, Lancelot is constantly worried about his image and status as a knight, and part of that involves a concern for Guinevere's reputation and well-being, too. Lancelot is a key figure for my study, caught up in both the codes of chivalry which dictate his loyalty and behavior with other men and his illicit love for Guinevere which helps govern his behavior with other women. Whereas Guinevere is tested with treason trials three times, Lancelot is faced with informal trials of women who desire him for themselves, testing his loyalty to Guinevere. Lancelot does not fail, exactly, but is tricked by magic into giving in to one of the women, Elaine of Corbin, with whom he has a son, Galahad.¹¹ Accusations of treason are a primary motivating factor for Lancelot, linked always to his other main goals of winning (and keeping) his masculine, chivalric honor and defending his lady.

¹¹ Galahad's spiritual perfection is ultimately a negative reflection on the spiritual deficiency of his father, unable to stop himself from continuing his affair with his king's wife until the very end of the text.

Comparing the relative trials of the two lovers, with special attention to the means by which each can fight the charges, reveals even further how much gender intersects with treason. Both Lancelot and Guinevere are tested, but Guinevere's trials are more severe, state affairs in which she is helpless to defend herself and must rely on male champions to take up her cause and fight a physical battle to establish her innocence. Lancelot, on the other hand, fails one of his private trials, but is always able to escape public shame. Lancelot's masculinity, his strength and reputation as the most powerful knight in the land, is assaulted several times throughout the text, but ultimately it is what allows him to continue the adulterous affair because he is always able to fight off, literally, the accusations. Yet it is his success in battle that leads to his refusal to make a true confession of his sins, and makes his penance at the end of the text seem far less genuine than Guinevere's. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which treason seems to be defined and challenged in the text generally, then move to a more specific analysis of the ways in which treason and gender intersect in the last books of the *Morte*, as canny use of the discourse of treason forces Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery to light, drives the split between Gawain and Lancelot, and ultimately signals the end of Arthur's reign when his own son, Mordred, attacks.

Treason in the fifteenth century

As Paul Strohm points out, "The discourse of treason is so widely distributed and prevalent in the later Middle Ages as to defy compact summary" (*Politique* 187).¹² But

¹² See his *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

even a brief review of the shifting definitions and applications of treason charges in the fifteenth century will demonstrate just how complex the idea of treason was becoming. Even after the turmoil of Richard II's reign, treason maintained its status as both the most heinous and the most complicated charge in English law. Henry IV was careful to try to reestablish a sense of boundaries for the king after taking the throne in 1399, ending all the additions Richard had added to the scope of treason and returning to the basic rules set out in the 1352 Statute (Bellamy 115-116).¹³ However, it was also under his reign that a major change to the definition of treason was added: treason by words.¹⁴ The initial cases seemed to be a result of anxiety over Henry's recent usurpation: four out of five cases in 1402 "were connected with the affair of the false Richard" (Bellamy 116). Yet this was too powerful a weapon to discard once the possibilities were realized. Bellamy notes that during Henry IV's reign, "several men were executed for high treason committed merely by the uttering of words: this was also held as imagining the king's death" (107). Language itself becomes suspect. This seems, in a way, a natural extension of the first clause of the 1352 Statute, which after all held that it was treason simply to "compass or imagine the death of the king" (Maitland and Pollock 501, n.1). Not only were thoughts fodder for treason charges, but words as well. This negation of the need for physical proof, or for an overt act, becomes a key point in Malory's text in the debate over the third of Guinevere's trials for treason.

¹³ See his *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*.

¹⁴ Bellamy points out that the fifteenth century saw other changes to treason law as well, including "popular insurrection" (106) and "The use of necromancy for traitorous purposes," which "involved using the magic arts to communicate with the dead in order to make predictions" (126). These focused on women, including Henry IV's widow Queen Joan in 1419, and Eleanor Cobham, duchess of Gloucester, in 1441 (126-127).

Another change to the treason laws was the increased use of the act of attainder.¹⁵ People could be “attainted” of guilt by Parliament without a full trial, “established by battle, by outlawry, or under the ancient prerogative power of the crown, that is, by record or notoriety” (Bellamy 178). Thus “the judicial process almost disappeared and the pronouncement of penalty came to stand by itself” (Bellamy 177). This began, of course, under Richard II, but it continued to grow in importance throughout the fifteenth century, particularly during the tumultuous period of the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485). Richard, duke of York, was thus attainted of treason in 1459 (Strohm *Politique* 188). Even the dead could be attainted of treason, meaning not only that the reigning king could acquire the property of the so-called traitors, but that the victors could rewrite the motives of their enemies. Though Richard II’s reign at the end of the fourteenth century saw, perhaps, the widest and quickest expansion of treason laws during the Middle Ages, the fifteenth century also witnessed a series of developments to treason law. Growing both naturally and yet counterintuitively out of the earlier attempts to broaden the scope of treason, the increased use of charges of treason by words and of attainder during the fifteenth-century points to the continued anxiety about the ultimate intangibility of treason.

Changes to the definition and application of treason charges seem to have settled a bit after Henry IV’s reign, but the political situation of England did not. Dorsey Armstrong points out that “The throne of fifteenth-century England changed hands eight

¹⁵ Bellamy notes that “It is a paradox of history that the much abused act of attainder owed its early development to a king who was particularly careful not to proceed unconstitutionally” (185).

times (rarely peacefully), and the frequency of violent successions necessarily compounded those pressures already attendant on knights and nobles faced with the difficulty of negotiating loyalties within a complex and changing system of loyalty and service” (6).¹⁶ Even legal theorists themselves, such as John Fortescue and Reginald Pecock, were caught up in the unstable and dizzying shifts as the Lancastrians struggled to fend off the Yorkists.¹⁷ Having suffered a slow and painful defeat in the Hundred Years War, and the problems inherent in the reign of the child-king Henry VI, England found no relief during his adult reign. Edward IV seized power in 1461, only to lose it to his own erstwhile supporter Warwick in 1470, leading to the return of Henry. By 1471, Edward was once again on the throne (Riddy 2). The back and forth between the two most powerful houses in England led to frantic attempts on the part of their respective supporters to keep up, and “fostered a situation in which nearly everybody was thought a traitor by somebody, at one time or another” (Strohm *Politique* 141). Moreover, Yorkist attempts to seize the throne gave the aristocracy, and in particular the knights who were no longer fighting in France, a place to direct their aggression: at each other. Strohm notes that “After 1450, with the institutions of monarchical authority in more severe contestation, and division among and between King, Council, and even Richard duke of York as sometime Protector, treason accusations tended to fly both ways, with each party

¹⁶ See her *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory’s Morte d’Arthur*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

¹⁷ Strohm notes that “the fact that each of the two most energetic and creative authors of vernacular argumentative prose in the mid-fifteenth century was required in the end to disavow his own writings, and even to participate in their figurative or real destruction, invites reflection upon the difficulties which these unstable times imposed even upon self-styled defenders of loyalty” (168). See also Norman Doe’s *Fundamental Authority in Late Medieval English Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

arrogating the language of treason in its accusation of the other” (*Politique* 188).¹⁸ The turmoil of the Wars of the Roses only exacerbated the broadened discourse of treason that was already occurring. Malory, as noted, was embroiled in the power shifts until the end of his life. Although he was never charged with treason himself, the complexities of the shifting loyalties of the age seem to have caught up with him. Pardoned by Edward in 1462, he then returned to jail, and was subsequently excluded from Edward’s pardon in 1468, one of only fifteen who were left out, and from another pardon in 1470 (Field 129-131).

In the *Morte*, he alternately seems to draw on the widely available conceptions of treason, including treason committed without proof of overt acts and attainder, as well as guilt by presumption, and to call attention to the places where the story demands that something be called treason even though the fifteenth century would not have categorized it as such. In the text, it is always treason to attack Arthur directly, and it is treason to sleep with the queen, as Lancelot is accused of doing; these would have been easily recognizable treasons to Malory’s audience. Yet at the same time, nearly any act of betrayal or simple non-adherence to the Round Table Oath is often called treason, as is Guinevere’s behavior. As Batt points out, “For Malory...Arthurian law is a disconcerting blend of recognizable contemporary practice and less familiar legislations” (167).

Forcing the matter of treason, that is, making it a priority to pin down the legal identities of the traitors through formal challenges and trials by battle, does nothing but bring

¹⁸ As an example, Strohm points to the “simultaneous and mutual treason accusations at the skirmish at St. Albans” levied by York and Somerset in 1455, with York claiming that “he absolutely intended to lay hands on the traitors who were with the king” and Somerset responding that “he had no traitors near him except the duke of York, who had risen against his crown” (188). Strohm himself is citing from “The Dijon Recital”, printed by C.A. J. Armstrong, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 33 (1960): p. 63).

destruction in Camelot. Examining the legal and literary texts in parallel is thus made even more difficult with Malory's deliberate ambiguity. Knowledge of the fifteenth-century's main ideas and uses of the charge of treason is crucial to an understanding of the text, but it must therefore be complemented by an examination of the Malory's own examples and explanations.

Treason in the *Morte*: Oaths, Women, and Magic

Although Malory focuses on treason throughout the *Morte*, it is never really defined clearly. Everything from attempts to kill the king, to surprise attacks, deception, and unknighthly behavior all seems to fall under the general umbrella. It is a primary problem for Arthur, who dictates the response to treason in the famous Pentecostal Oath to which his knights must swear. After hearing the deeds (and misdeeds) of the post-wedding quests of the knights Gawain, Torre, and Pellinore, Arthur decides that his knights must abide by an initially simple-sounding code. He:

charged them never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allways to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy upon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evermore; and allways to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (120.17-24).

While the famous "ladies clause" is the focus of much scholarly attention, the order to avoid treason is also a main part of the oath. If the knights are "allways to fle treson," the clear presumption is that treason must always be lurking in some form or another. The very charge is problematic, however; Arthur is warning his knights to stay away from something that, logically, they probably will not be able to see in the first place. The

passivity implied in the charge is also interesting; whereas the knights are “never to *do*” outrages or murder, they are simply “to *flee*” treason (my italics). The Oath indicates that the only possible response to treason is a passive one, to run from it. Deborah Ellis makes the point that “Treason in this warning...can be neither invoked nor controlled; like the plague, its avoidance depends on flight rather than rectitude” (69). Yet the Oath does not seem to specify exactly what treason means.¹⁹ As Batt claims, this is a weakness not just of the Oath but of the society it represents (69). The knights are bound to avoid what seems to be an omnipresent and terrible but vague enemy. Kenneth Hodges notes that “this new formulation of chivalry emphasizes loyalty to ideals” (49).²⁰ Here, the ideal is clearly the opposite of treason, whatever that may be—honesty, trust, loyalty, openness. The treason section of the Oath thus works like its other sections, setting up an essentially vague ideal that presupposes its own opposite and does not lay out guidelines for tricky or conflicting situations.²¹ The Oath itself is an expectation, a code of behavior, an assumption of trust—exactly those things which treason subverts.

There is a clear, though shifting and multivalent, link between treason and women in the text, indicated in their collocation in the oath but not limited to that. Treason enters

¹⁹ Janet M. Cowen notes that “this oath can only be a general guide, not a detailed blue-print for chivalric conduct, but nevertheless, the outcome of the quest is an attempt to formulate some principles of action” (43). See her “‘False Treason and Enchantment’—Some Aspects of Malory’s Narrative Method.” *Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies* 10 (1978): 35-49. Armstrong notes that the definition leaves out an important aspect: “kin (dis)loyalty, which is nowhere explicitly addressed or regulated. Loyalty to blood often problematically supersedes loyalty to the Round Table order and the ideals expressed in the Pentecostal Oath, while *disloyal* acts on the part of one’s own blood relations are often the most destructive, in that they are entirely unexpected and unlooked for” (35).

²⁰ *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory’s Le Morte Darthur*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

²¹ Armstrong points out that “Part of the problem is that the Pentecostal Oath is at once too general and too specific; its clauses delineate proper knightly behavior—that which knights should do—and improper activity—that which knights should avoid—without addressing a possible intersection of the two” (32).

the poem even before Arthur enacts the Pentecostal Oath. The first person accused of treachery in the book is Igrayne, Arthur's mother. Once it is revealed that Arthur has slept (unknowingly) with his sister, the knight Ulphuns tells Igrayne that the ensuing scandal is her fault, and that "Ye are the falsyst lady of the worlde, and the moste traytours unto the kynges person" (45.10-11). Arthur stops Ulphuns, warning him to "Beware...what thou seyste: thou spekiste a grete worde" (45.12-13). This early scene is important to a discussion of treason for several reasons. For one, we see that treason remains the ultimate charge, "a grete worde," the worst transgression possible in a world filled with transgressions (incest, rape, murder, matricide, patricide, and filicide). Such a serious charge cannot go unanswered. For another, we see that treason is linked early on in the *Morte* to the idea of deliberate deception that leads to political chaos. Moreover, the presumed site of the hidden knowledge is a woman's body. Ulphuns assumes that Igrayne knows that Arthur is her son and that she has kept quiet deliberately and maliciously. Thus treason here is connected to the mystery that is the female body and its sexuality, particularly as that body affects male honor, lineage, and rule.

This early scene also brings up the specter of both rape and adultery. Igrayne, of course, has no idea that Arthur is her son; nor does she know exactly with whom she had sex the night that her husband died. Uther's rape of Igrayne, disguising himself as her husband in order to bed her, sets the whole Arthurian story in motion, an ironic commentary on the Oath which his son will proclaim as king. Igrayne, in fact, had tried to avoid being dishonored by Uther, and her attempt to avoid (forced) adultery is echoed ironically in the completely deliberate adultery of her son. Arthur, as David Scott Wilson-

Okamura points out, may be innocent of incest, but he is not innocent of adultery (25).²² While the focus in the text is primarily on the horror of the incest committed, there is still the fact that Arthur knows he is sleeping with a married woman. Arthur has chosen to sleep with the wife of one of his knights, putting his own desires ahead of loyalty to his knight or, indeed, his host. The lapse has devastating consequences. Once again, treason is also linked to the female body because the ultimate traitor in the book, Mordred, is the product of this incestuous and adulterous liaison. Merlin warns Arthur that the product of the affair “shall be the destruccion of all thys realme” (52.3). Treason is thus not just a major concern at the beginning of the Round Table, but at the beginning of Arthur himself, both his birth and his kingship. His conception, the rape-by-magic of his mother, shrouded in secrecy and deception, allows the unwitting incest (and witting adultery) that produces the monstrous Mordred. Hodges points out that “Mordred, the living reminder of the dangers of not recognizing family, lurks to bring down Arthur in the end” (48). Yet it is not just “not recognizing family” that is the problem, but choosing to betray the trust of his knight and host which condemns Arthur. The most intriguing aspect of this scene, however, is that the different repercussions for the (supposed) treasons of men and women are different: Arthur has obviously transgressed the bounds of loyalty, yet it is

²² Wilson-Okamura argues, in fact, that conscious adultery would have been seen as a much worse crime than unconscious incest; see his “Adultery and the Fall of Logres in the Post-Vulgate ‘Suite du Merlin.’” *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 16-46. While such an argument would work well with the text’s later focus on adultery as destructive, it must be noted that Malory’s text is silent on the issue of adultery here. Many scholars disagree with Wilson-Okamura. See Maureen Fries’s “Commentary: A Response to the *Arthuriana* Issue on Adultery.” *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 92-96. See also Elizabeth Archibald, who argues that the incest is the major problem here: “to commit incest was a greater sin than to commit adultery” (4). *Arthur and Mordred: Variations on an Incest Theme.* *Arthurian Literature VIII*. Ed. Richard Barber. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 1-27.

Igrayne who is accused. Women are the obvious targets of assumptions of treason, even when there is a more obvious male traitor present.

Discussing the uses of magic in the text, Geraldine Heng has said that “because its operations are secret or indecipherable, and may press even the unwilling into service, it is a thing to be feared, particularly by a warrior ethic, for its mysterious compulsion” (103). The same may be said of treason. The magic objects that detect or protect against treason presuppose its power. Often, these objects are linked to women.²³ For example, early in the text, in “Balin le Sauvage,” the damsel announces that the magical sword she carries²⁴ can only be taken by a man “without velony other trechory and withoute treson” (62.1-2). Arthur tries—and fails, reminding the reader that even the king is not without the taint of “trechory” himself. Ironically, when Balin is able to draw the sword, he then refuses the (first) Lady of the Lake’s request to give it back, slaying her instead (66.3-4).²⁵ Deborah Ellis argues persuasively that this episode is vital to an understanding of how treason functions in the text: “Balin’s freedom from treachery is immediately

²³ Heng notes that “To be conscious of the precise borders of a feminine hinterland, it is first necessary to be aware of the feminine origin of many of the enabling conditions for activity. The simplest form of this would be that tissue of gifts and material objects intruded into the narrative by women, which surround and underlies the textual drama” (97). See her “Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory.” *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Ed. Thelma S. Fenster. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. 97-113. Reprinted from *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context. Selected papers from the 5th Triennial Congress of the ICLS, Dalfsen, The Netherlands, 9-16 August, 1986*. Ed. Keith Busby, Erik Kooper. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990. 283-300. Elizabeth Edwards, similarly, claims that “The wilderness, the magical and the unexplained thus fall in line with the mystery that is woman, from the male perspective” (39). See “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*.” *A Companion to Malory*. Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 1996. 37-54.

²⁴ On swords, see Heng, for whom swords are “the instruments on which all masculine accomplishment must turn, and therefore pivotal to conceptions of male identity and personal force” (98).

²⁵ Heng points out that Balin’s rude denial is the inverse of Arthur’s earlier grateful acceptance of Excalibur, also a magical sword bestowed on a man by a woman—by the very woman Balin slays, in fact (98).

established in the story and yet is undercut by all subsequent events” (67).²⁶ He will, of course, go on to not only slay his own brother, but to give “the dolorous stroke” that lays waste to an entire kingdom. Balin claims that he was doing his duty, as the Lady was treacherous herself, getting his mother “brent thorow hir falsehode and trechory” (66.14).

The cyclic nature of treason is clear: the most virtuous knight present slays the woman whose treason-detecting sword he has just won, giving her no warning, which surely seems treacherous, but does so because the woman herself was a traitor—to another woman. This early mention of a woman burned for “falsehode and trechory” of course evokes Guinevere. It also links treason and vengeance, both against and for women. At the same time, Ellis notes, “by killing a traitor, he becomes tinged with treason” (69). The magical sword functions on the one hand as wish fulfillment—to be able to discern treachery in this world would be a powerful weapon, indeed. But it also functions to help spread the discourse of treason. Ellis argues, rightly, that “it is just this contagious nature of treason that Malory finds most compelling throughout the *Morte*” (69). One treason reveals or brings on another, sometimes doing both simultaneously.

Both the scene of Igrayne’s accusation and Balin’s ambiguous triumph in winning the magic sword occur before Arthur has established the Round Table and the knights’ Oath. But even after he has tried to lay down these guidelines, the problem of treason crops up repeatedly. There is, to take a similar example to the Balin story, another magic sword, also linked to a woman and bathed in a backstory of treason. Arthur has entrusted

²⁶ Archibald makes a similar point: “it seems particularly baffling that he should be virtuous enough to draw the Lady of the Lake’s sword, and then should precipitate one disaster after another” (“Beginnings” 143). However, this makes a clear parallel with Arthur, who is “virtuous enough” to draw Excalibur but whose fixation on ideals allows the destruction of his own court.

his half-sister Morgan le Fey with both Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard. But when Arthur needs the sword, in a fight with Accolon, Morgan sends him a counterfeit one: “she was falce, for the swerde and the scawberde was counterfete and brutyll and false” (142.12-13). Morgan breaks the trust Arthur has placed in her. When the sword fails Arthur, “he demed treson” (142.31). Magical objects can, in fact, not only distinguish traitors, but reveal treachery.

Yet, as is often the case, the false sword is not the only treason in the episode. Arthur is fighting for the traitorous knight Damas, who has illegally deprived his younger brother of the castle (138.27-30), but who is also holding Arthur and his men prisoners. Accolon, on the other hand, is fighting for the deprived brother. It would seem that already Arthur is in a bind as regards his own oath: he is engaged in a “wrongfull quarrel” here, but only because he is trying to save the lives of both himself and his men. Accolon, meanwhile, is engaged on the “right” side of the quarrel, but for a “wrong” reason—he is fighting at the request of his lover, Morgan La Fey. Hodges remarks that “The obvious question is which man is fighting in the wrongful quarrel: Accolon, whose cause is technically just but who undertakes it selfishly as part of treason, or Arthur, who undertakes a wrongful cause to save others and to defend his crown” (52). Arthur cannot “fle treson” here; if anything, he has chosen to move towards it. He defeats Accolon after retrieving the real Excalibur from him, with some help from the second Lady of the Lake, and informs him that “by thy wordis that thou haste agreed to the deth of my persone, and therefore thou art a traytoure” (146.16-18). This is one of the most explicit and easily recognizable forms of treason in the book; to plot the death of the king was treason in any

age. Yet, recalling how the blame for Arthur's transgressions was ultimately laid at Igrayne's feet, Arthur is willing to show Accolon mercy while reserving his anger for Morgan (146.56-57). Here, the false Excalibur functions as a metaphor for the treachery and falseness within Arthur's kingdom, within his own family, even. Arthur can only be hurt by his own sword (148.6-8). The most dangerous enemy is the one within; if that enemy is a woman, she is more dangerous still.

But treason is not the exclusive purview of women in Malory's text. Treason and treachery are, generally, heavily defined by secrecy and deception, whether the deceiver is a woman or a man. For example, the invisible knight Garlon is a "traytoure knyght" because he slays people with no warning (81.11-12). Breaking a promise is also considered treachery, such as when Gawain promises Pelleas to help him win Ettarde, but then sleeps with her himself; Pelleas clearly considers this a betrayal (170.16-17). The most prolific traitor in the book is male: not Mordred, whose treason is perhaps more momentous, and to whom I will return, but King Mark of Cornwall, who commits treason repeatedly. He has a habit of calling those around him traitors even though he is typically the one doing the betrayal. The list of his treasons is long and varied. Mark hates Tristram after he succeeds in seducing Segwarydes's wife: "So aftir that, thoughe there were fayre speche, love was there none" (396.9-10). Mark is deceptive, lying with a smile on his face. Moreover, he charges Uwayne without any warning, another form of "treson" (547.8-9). When his knight Bersules refuses to follow an order he considers treacherous, and breaks with him, Mark kills him after calling *Bersules* a "traytoure" (578.24). This is too much for his erstwhile supporter Andret, who claims that "Hit was foule done and

myschevously, wherefore we woll do you no more servyse. And wete you well we woll appele you of treson afore kynge Arthure” (578.28-30). This being done, Mark lies directly to Arthur, who instructs him to stop persecuting Tristram, swearing that he will love him even as he “thought falsely” (609.13). Worse, he kills his own brother, calling him a “false traytoure” before stabbing him to death (634.7). One of the funniest moments in the text, in fact, is Mark’s disappointed declaration after finding out that his nephew Alexander, whom he tried to have murdered as well, is alive and coming after him; it is “false treson,” he declares, because he thought “that yonge traytoure had ben dede. Alas! whom may I trust?” (637.21).²⁷ Worst of all, in a brief aside late in the text, we hear that “Also that traytoure kynge slew the noble knyght sire Trystram as he sate harpyng afore hys lady” (1149.28-29).²⁸ Mark and his hyperbolic commitment to treason verge on the comic, but ultimately he is responsible for the death of a series of worthy knights, including the knight second only to Lancelot. Male treachery, done the old-fashioned way without magic, is just as destructive as female treachery. Mordred will prove this as well.

The Betrayal: Lancelot and Guinevere’s Affair

But the most famous betrayal in the *Morte* is the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, a betrayal in which both genders are implicated. While a full discussion of

²⁷ Although he does ultimately kill Alexander, it is Alexander’s son who avenges his father’s death and kills Mark.

²⁸ The idea of a traitorous king is dangerous, and must be displaced from Arthur onto Mark. Riddy notes that “Malory is able to cast the wronged husband as the villain precisely because adultery is a public issue and not a matter of private morality. Mark instigates the turbulence that flows from adultery, whereas Arthur holds it in check” (Malory 103). Similarly, Beverly Kennedy argues that “Mark dishonours himself by openly committing treason against his nephew” and thus has no right to complain about the adultery of his wife and nephew (68). See her “Adultery in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.” *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 63-91.

their relationship and its consequences will be the focus of the rest of this chapter, a brief detour is necessary here. Malory's sources make clear that Lancelot and Guinevere are passionately in love, engaging in a sexual affair long before they are formally accused of anything. But Malory makes things far more ambiguous. In fact, Beverly Kennedy has argued that Lancelot and Guinevere are not sexually active for most of the text:

“Throughout the long book, Malory has carefully and consistently omitted all evidence of any actual adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere; yet many modern readers still assume that Lancelot and the queen are regularly committing adultery” (73). Most of the time, she claims, theirs is a chaste love such as Malory describes in the famous and frustratingly vague passage: then, he says, “men and women coude love togydires seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betweyxtre them, and than was love trouthe and faythefulness. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthures dayes” (1120.3-6). Robert S. Sturges concurs that Malory problematizes any clear assumption about the affair, pointing out that he “consistently omits precisely those passages in his sources that discuss the physical nature of Lancelot's and Guinevere's relationship most directly, as well as adding interpretive—or, more precisely, non-interpretive—passages to their story” (47).²⁹ Whereas Kennedy argues that they sleep together only once, in the scene at Mellyagaunt's castle that will be discussed a little later, Sturges is more circumspect, concluding that “the nature of knowledge in his textual system is that it is

²⁹ See his “Epistemology of the Bedchamber: Textuality, Knowledge, and the Representation of Adultery in Malory and the Prose *Lancelot*.” *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 47-62.

always deferred. Our moral judgment of the lovers must therefore, for Malory, be permanently deferred as well” (61).

However, despite the very interesting cases that both scholars make, I am assuming in my discussion that the adultery, a sexual affair, starts early and continues until Lancelot is forced to return Guinevere to Arthur after the last of her treason trials. Here, I am following Derek Brewer, who admits that it is impossible to tell when the sexual affair starts, but makes the point that “There must have been a period before Lancelot, to put it crudely, actually got in to bed with Guinevere, but in Malory’s telling that period does not seem at all important. The proof that it was not important to Malory is that he never shows the moment of acceptance, the moment of transition, of mutually realised love” (“Presentation” 44).³⁰ The actual timing of the affair is less important than the fact that it is simply always understood to be going on. While Malory does not follow his sources in their explicitness, thus, he cannot pretend that his readers are not well aware of the famous love between Lancelot and Guinevere. As Janet Cowen points out, their love’s “origin and growth receive no extended application in the narrative; it is rather one of the presuppositions on which the narrative is based. Here as elsewhere the sentimental analysis of earlier romance lies beneath the surface of Malory’s writing, supplying unstated premises which need no further validation” (38).

These “premises” are not always necessarily “unstated,” though. Even the first description of their connection reveals both how tightly entwined their identities are and

³⁰ See his “The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot: Chrétien to Malory.” *Arthurian Literature III*. Ed. Richard Barber. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 26-52. Maureen Fries, in her response to Kennedy’s article, puts things a little more bluntly, arguing that Kennedy’s belief that Lancelot would not blithely commits adultery “does not preclude the rest of us from drawing the obvious conclusion” (96).

brings the affair to mind: “quene Guenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the queen agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry” (253.15-19). As Brewer points out, this forward-looking comment reminds the readers of what they already know: “Saving Gwenyvere from the fire occurs towards the end of *Le Morte Darthur* and besides being one of numerous references forward which links ‘the whole book’ together as a connected, if episodic, whole, emphasizes that we hold the whole story of Launcelot and Gwenyvere, if only cloudily, simultaneously in mind” (“Proving” 125). They are linked from the beginning, even going so far back as Merlin’s warning to Arthur before his marriage to Guinevere.³¹ Both of these early connections remind the readers of what they already know, suggesting a timeless quality to the affair that reduces, if not erases, the need for a specific starting date.

Although such a date is impossible to determine, Malory makes it clear in “Lancelot and Elaine” that the two have been sleeping together for some time. After Lancelot has slept with Elaine, thinking that she is Guinevere, which is perhaps proof in itself that the sexual affair has already started,³² the real Guinevere is close enough to hear him sleep:

in his slepe he talked and claterde as a jay of the love that had bene betweyxte quene Gwenyver and hym, and so as he talked so lowde the quene harde hym theras she lay in her chamber. And whan she harde hym so clatter she was wrothe oute of mesure, and for anger and payne wist not what to do, and then she cowghed so lowde that sir Launcelot awaked. And anone he knew her hemmynge, and than he knew welle that he lay

³¹ See 97.30-31; I will discuss this scene below.

³² Hodges points out that Lancelot “does not act as if he is going to a first encounter” (104).

not by the quene, and therewith he lepte oute of hys bedde as he had bene a wood man, in hys shurte, and anone the quene mette hym in the floure; and thus she seyde: ‘A, thou false traytoure knyght! Loke thou never abyde in my courte, and lightly that thou voyde my chamber! And be nat so hardy, thou false traytour knyght, that evermore thou come in my sight!’ (805.11-29).

Admittedly, “the love that had bene betweyxt” them could be of the chaste variety Kennedy suggests; however, what seems more important is, as Amy S. Kaufman puts it, the “suffocatingly familiar details of their intimacy” (82).³³ Guinevere recognizes his sleepy mumbling, just as Lancelot knows her “hemmynge” from the next room. The two clearly enjoy an intimate relationship, and it is that intimacy that is threatened by Lancelot’s sleeping with another woman. Guinevere sees this as a betrayal, not only calling him a “traytoure” but exiling him from court. Their relationship is serious, yet no more secure than any other in the text. Betrayal strikes the betrayers just as easily as it strikes the betrayed. Their affair is fraught with danger, with each facing trials. Yet as I will discuss below, these trials are split along gendered lines. The same system that constrains Guinevere from fighting back, either with words or with weapons, allows Lancelot to occlude the truth with ease, denying rumors directly and physically fighting other men to establish his version of the truth as the only one that matters. Thus, I consider each character separately in order to examine how the discourse of treason works in Malory both along and against gendered lines.

Lancelot and “all thys langayge”

Just as treason is built into the fabric of Arthurian society, it is part of Lancelot’s identity. Malory tells us, in fact, that he is partially defined by his relationship with

³³ See her “Guenevere Burning,” *Arthuriana* 20.1 (2010): 76-94.

treason: “at no tyme was he overcome but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement” (253.10-12). Lancelot’s prowess is what defines him, and that prowess is linked here to the only things that can defeat it: treason and magic. These, as noted above, are often linked themselves.³⁴ This is one of the ways in which treason maintains its hold as the ultimate crime throughout the Middle Ages; betrayal can bring down anyone, even a knight as powerful and seemingly unbeatable as Lancelot. Yet he is also connected to treason by his consistent denial of any such taint. In “The Knight of the Cart,” Mellyagaunce, somewhat ironically, warns Lancelot to do “no treson nother no vylany” (1134.13); Lancelot replies that “I fared never wyth no treson, nother I loved the felyshyp of hym that fared with treson” (1134.17-19). Yet his proud rejection of treason also serves to remind the reader of his own treacherous affair with Guinevere.

As Ellis notes, there is no proper response to treason. It cannot be fought, as Balin finds out, nor ignored, as both Arthur and Lancelot learn. Lancelot seems uncannily able to hold simultaneously contradictory views on loyalty and treason, particularly romantic betrayal. He is appalled when he hears that his good friend Trystram has married the second Isode, declaring that he “woll be his mortall enemy” for such a betrayal (435.19). Lancelot may be an adulterer himself, but as Cherewatuk points out, he is “singularly committed” to it (69). Just as in the Oath, this adherence to a code that rejects treason helps construct him as the most perfect of knights, and the height of chivalry, masculinity. To be a traitor is to be a bad knight; to be a bad knight is to be a bad man.

³⁴ Armstrong notes that “Throughout the *Morte d’Arthure*...the hazards of ‘treason’ and ‘inchauntement’ reveal themselves as key components of the romantic quest even as they simultaneously and contradictorily pose threats to the agents of the quest” (74).

His staunch public refusal to deal in treachery helps construct this image of both the ideal knight and the ideal man while at the same time his actions with Guinevere call this very image into question.

Just as the Oath presupposes the victimhood of women, the link to treason presupposes that he will be defeated occasionally.³⁵ Although he is the victim of treason at the hands of men occasionally, such as when Sir Pedyvere chops off his wife's head while she is under Lancelot's protection (285.6-14), he is most often the victim of female treachery. Interestingly, his relationship with treason also works to feminize him in a way. For Lancelot, this involves deceptive attempts to get him into bed. All three times also involve magic, although to varying degrees. As with Guinevere's three trials, he is innocent for the first two, and guilty, though problematically so, for the third. He finds himself, then, frequently in the role of what is typically the feminine in the text: the desired object who is forced or tricked into sex. The first instance occurs in the forest during "Lancelot of the Lake" when four queens (one of whom is Morgan La Fey) enchant him and try to make him choose one of them as his lover (256-258.30-36). Armstrong notes that "The queens' imitation of masculine behavior subverts and challenges the paradigms of competition, fellowship, and recognition/identity that Malory's text usually models" (97). If the women enact the typical roles of men, Lancelot here is forced into the role of the woman. Interestingly, the magic is only used to capture

³⁵ In his study of Lancelot in Chrétien, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that Lancelot's desire for Guinevere is akin to masochism in that he enjoys his consistently "debased" position and identity in his role in their affair (241). While Lancelot in the *Morte* does not undergo the same sort of shaming that he does in *Charrette*, the constant threat of treason, particularly at the hands of ladies, seems to function in a similar way. Malory seems unwilling to let his hero face the same dire predicaments as Chrétien does, but the embarrassing positions in which Lancelot finds himself may be echoes. See Cohen's "Masoch/Lancelotism." *New Literary History*. 28.2 (1997): 231-260.

him, not to force him to choose one of the ladies, who seem to want him to select one of them of his own free (if compromised) will. He duly rejects them all, and, surprisingly, they let it go at that, leaving him in the prison to be rescued by another woman, the daughter of Bagdemagus (258.27-34). He is thus not only taken by women, but rescued by a woman. Armstrong notes that “captured, enchanted, and imprisoned by four powerful females who are outside the homosocial Round Table order, the helpless Lancelot is feminized, his identification as aggressive/masculine/dominant in *both* spheres of community undermined” (98). At the same time, it must be noted that the damsel only releases him because she needs him to help her father in a battle; his masculinity is thus the justification of his rescue in the first place.

The second attempt on Lancelot’s constancy is made by a single sorceress, Hallewes. She has apparently loved him for seven years, but “there may no woman have thy love but queene Gwenyver” (281.14-15). When Lancelot rejects her as well, she informs him that if he had not, she would have kept his embalmed body so that she could kiss it, “dispyte of queen Gwenyvere” (281.20). Batt points out that

Hallewes’s fantasy...makes Launcelot simultaneously abject/object and relic, horribly sacralized through erotic desire. Yet Hallewes, although her language transgresses the *Morte*’s sexual decorum, is simply extending the romance notion of the hero as concretized and fantastically ‘preserved’ object, as fully known literary hero, defined in relation to Guinevere, in the eyes of other characters as of the readers. (91)

All five of these enchantresses, the four queens and Hallewes, want Lancelot sexually, and all are willing and capable of using magic to reach their goal. Yet once again, Lancelot is feminized by finding himself the object of desire, in this case quite literally,

but evades the predicament by his staunch refusal to betray his lover, reifying his masculine identity against the threat.³⁶

In both of these instances, Lancelot finds himself in the typically feminine role of the pursued victim of unwanted and deceitful sexual advances.³⁷ At the same time, each of these provides an occasion for Malory to remind the reader about Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere; they reaffirm his masculinity, within his role as heteronormative lover and manly defender. Barbara Nolan notes that "the enchantresses give Lancelot the chance to assert his single-hearted devotion to his queen" (179).³⁸ The four ladies, like Hallewes, know about the rumors already (257.26-28).³⁹ Lancelot must consistently defend Guinevere's honor: "were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on yours that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng" (258). Such scenes are Malory's additions. As Cherewatuk points out, "In the sources, the ladies do not lament the knights commitment to Guenevere and, in fact, never mention the queen. Launcelot does not praise Guenevere's loyalty to Arthur or defend his own unmarried state; he too never mentions the queen" (xxii). On the one hand, these episodes display Lancelot's

³⁶ He is, moreover, allowed to resist, unlike many of the *Morte's* less lucky damsels.

³⁷ Armstrong sees this as a function of the text's rigid gender roles: "knights never readily perceive or anticipate the occasional malicious female who seeks to harm or destroy a knight. Arthur's knights have no mechanism or means by which they may recognize or effectively deal with such a danger" (103).

³⁸ See "*The Tale of Sir Gareth and The Tale of Sir Launcelot.*" In *A Companion to Malory*, eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996. 153-182.

³⁹ Hodges notes that "Women ask Launcelot frequently about his relation to Guinevere because it does affect his public role: whether he is on the marriage market, to whom his allegiances lie (particularly as the court grows more factionalized), and what his relation to the king may be are public questions; thus the strength of his bond to her is a matter of public importance, even if the private actions it is based on may not be" (75).

idealized version of himself as a defender of ladies; on the other, they serve as constant reminders of the least ideal aspect of his character. Armstrong notes that

In emphasizing the role that Guenevere plays in the construction of Lancelot's knightly identity, Malory also interestingly suppresses any explicit evidence of adultery [...] Significantly, Malory's inclusion of these moments of accusation permits Lancelot to respond by affirming both the chaste nature of his love for the queen and the positive role that his devotion for her has in refining his knightly identity (101).

Malory holds Lancelot in a delicate balance, able to inhere the contradictions of being masculine and feminine, loyal and disloyal at the same time. Both of these episodes simultaneously feminize him and reaffirm his masculine appeal and status, recalling his treason to Arthur as he tries to avoid betraying Guinevere.

This is nowhere more problematic than during the third, and successful, attempt on his sexual fidelity. As we have seen, Elaine of Corbin actually does, with the help of her maid Brusen and her magical ability, achieve her goal and get Lancelot into bed. She gives Lancelot a potion that makes him think that he is going to bed with Guinevere; as Malory tells us, "And wyte you well that Sir Launcelot was glad" (795.12). Lancelot is duped into bed with the wrong woman by the combination of treason and magic that is his Achilles heel. This combination, though, is not new in the *Morte*.⁴⁰ Lancelot is shamed by his status as a victim of treason. When the potion wears off, "he knew hymself that he had done amyse" (795.22-23), and bemoans the fact that "now am I

⁴⁰ Cherewatuk argues that "In the use of deception, this sex scene recalls that of Uther and Igraine... Although he is in the powerless position of Igraine... Launcelot is not feminized; unlike Malory's mothers, he does not serve as a passive vessel for royal blood" (96). Yet most critics agree that Lancelot is, in fact, feminized here. As Hodges points out, Galahad's "conception strongly resembles Arthur's except with reversed gender roles" (114). Heng also makes this comparison, putting "an equally-deceived Lancelot" in the place of Ygrayne (104). Batt notes that Lancelot makes use of "the idiom of rape," problematizing gender roles here (122).

shamed” (795.24-25). Ironically, it is his manliness that the women assault, the very quality that attracts them. Moreover, the codes of gender behavior prevent him from taking his typical masculine revenge. He never threatens the four queens, or Hallewes, with violence, but after he has been tricked into sex with Elaine, “he gate his swerde in his honde” (795.26) and accused her of being a “tratoures” (796.4). Instead of striking or slaying her, however, he accepts her explanation that she is already pregnant (796.1-3). He vows instead to get revenge on Brusen, vowing that she “shall lose her hede for her wycchecraftys, for there was never knyght disceyved as I am” (796.14-15).⁴¹

Lancelot’s masculinity is compromised as he becomes the object of lust, but it is his very masculinity which constrains him to accept this status without fighting back. Plus, there is the matter of the son which his affair-within-an-affair produces: Galahad.⁴² Lancelot’s sexual prowess produces (though unwittingly) the most perfect knight of the whole Round Table, one who is notoriously chaste himself. This may be one of the only examples in the whole *Morte* that shows an act of treachery (on the part of Elaine, that is) that actually produces a positive result. Yet as the episodes of Lancelot’s trials as a whole show, betrayal tends to lead simply to other possible betrayals. The Oaths and codes of gender and behavior can be twisted, reflecting his own ambiguously gendered role.

⁴¹ While Lancelot seems to highlight the “wycchecraftys” as the main reason for his hatred of Brusen, there is also the matter that Elaine has reminded him that she is the daughter of a king (796.6-7). Her elevated status may be another reason he forgives her.

⁴² Jill Mann points out that “it is this action [sleeping with Elaine], which is at the furthest point of removal from his true self, that paradoxically produces the unflawed wholeness embodied in Galahad [...] Without Lancelot’s adultery, Galahad’s purity would not come into being” (217). See her “Malory and the Grail Legend.” In *A Companion to Malory*. Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996. 203-20.

Lancelot is, I would argue, feminized in yet another way, not just in the way he is frequently captured and made an object of feminine lust, but also in his emotional reactions to these trials. Lancelot is concerned not just with betrayals perpetrated against him, but with his own reputation as a traitor. As I have argued in previous chapters, it is generally female characters who worry about their reputations. Unlike the men in *The Legend of Good Women*, who betray their women without a second thought (sometimes repeatedly), Lancelot is desperately bothered by any accusations of treachery. Moreover, unlike Ganelon, who rejects the idea that he has committed treason while fully admitting to his own actions in the death of Roland and the rearguard, Lancelot consistently denies not only his own guilt but any action at all. He does this most frequently through his denials of Guinevere's guilt, as I have just argued, both in speech and through his challenges to save her from her punishments. Cherevatuk argues "that Launcelot's insistence on the queen's chastity within marriage and his discomfort with the adultery match Malory's and his audience's social background" (xxii-xxiii). As a practical matter, however, he has little choice. He can hardly go around admitting the affair.⁴³ Yet his constant defense of Guinevere is more complicated than it may seem at first: it is chivalric and noble behavior, but it also works to distance him from his own role in the affair, his own guilt. Lancelot thus spends the majority of the *Morte* refusing to admit that there is any truth to the rumors, in trying to keep both his own and Guinevere's reputations safe.

⁴³ As Brewer notes wryly, "Could he say in effect, 'Do not worry about my love life, dear lady, because I am in fact the adulterous lover of my Queen'?" ("Presentation" 43).

In fact, what ultimately galvanizes Lancelot into action is the way Mordred and Aggravayn heighten the discourse of treason, the words “treson” and “traytour” themselves. To take a counterexample, the “bad” knight Mellyagaunt proclaims proudly that he does not care about “all thys langayge” (1122.16) when he is accused of being a traitor.⁴⁴ The implication is clear: “good” knights should care, as part of “allweyes” fleeing treason. As Ellis points out, “To be a traitor, in Malory, is to be the worst kind of antisocial criminal, one whose guilt must taint his world” (71). This description fits Mellyagaunt, whose treacherous plot will spawn a separate case against Guinevere. But it is far more problematic when applied to Lancelot.

Just as in the early episode when Arthur cautions Ulphuns about using the “grete worde,” an exchange between Bors and Guinevere shows that the discourse of treason is powerful, creating a charge that cannot be laughed off or taken lightly by good knights. Angry at Lancelot for wearing Elaine of Ascolat’s red token at the joust, Guinevere complains to Bors: “Have ye nat herde sey how falsely sir Launcelot hat betrayed me?” (1080.25-26). More philosophically, Bors replies that “he hath betrayed hymselff and us all” (1080.27-28). But when she bitterly remarks that she does not care “though he be destroyed, for he ys a false, traytoure knyght” (1080.29-30), Bors draws the line. He tells her to stop, “for wyte you well I may nat here no such langayge of hym” (1080.32-33). Apparently, saying that he has “betrayed” her is fine; the loyal Bors even repeats it himself. But upping the ante, and switching to “traytoure,” is a step too far.

⁴⁴ Guinevere calls him a “Traytoure knyght” (1122.8) and tries to shame him into giving up the abduction plot (1122.8-15). Many critics point to the irony of her accusation here. But there are some big differences: consent, public/private accusations. They may not do a good job of keeping it secret, but they try.

It is precisely such language that amps up the tension and foments the battles that lead to the destruction of the kingdom in two key scenes involving Lancelot, one to do with adultery, and one with murder: the attempted capture of the lovers, and his subsequent battle with Gawayne. In his attempt to force Arthur to deal with the affair, Aggravayne is initially coy about the charges: “I mervayle that we all be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene. And all we know well that hit ys so, and hit ys shamefully suffird of us all that we shulde suffir so noble a kynge as kynge Arthur ys to be shamed” (1161.19-23). Although none of the knights back him up except Mordred (1161.30), Aggravayne presses his case to Arthur in even stronger language: “we know all that sir Launcelot holdith youre quene, and hath done longe; and we be your syster sunnes, we may suffir hit no lenger. And all we wote that ye shulde be above sir Launcelot, an ye ar the kynge that made hym knyght, and therefore we woll preve hit that he is a traytoure to youre person” (1163.7-11). The first part of the speech is basically the same: everyone knows that Lancelot is sleeping with the queen and has been for a long time, and that it is shameful to Arthur. But when he talks directly to the king, Aggravayne not only reminds him of their kinship, but says flatly that Lancelot’s actions make him “a traytoure to youre person.”

This seems to be the magic word. As we have seen from the earliest part of the text, Arthur cannot ignore such a serious charge. He takes the news of their affair, coming from his nephew Aggravayne and his nephew/son Mordred, fairly calmly, but is clearly ready to act at this point:

Gyff hit be so...wye you well, he ys non othir [than a traitor]. But I wolde be lothe to begyn such a thyng but I myght have prevys of hit, for sir

Launcelot ys an hardy knyght, and all ye know that he ys the beste knyght amonge us all, and but if he be takyn with the dede he woll fyght with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym. Therefore, and hit be soote as ye say, I wolde that he were takyn with the dede. (1163.12-19)

He frames the whole thing as a conditional, only going so far as to acknowledge that “gyff” the rumors are true, Lancelot is indeed a traitor. What concerns Arthur here is the practical problems involved in proving such a charge. The best way, the only way, is to catch him in the act, “takyn with the dede.”⁴⁵ Treason is too “grete” a word, too damning an accusation to give it anything less than full attention to ensure that the full penalty is applied.

Yet Malory explains that Arthur wishes the whole thing could be ignored.⁴⁶ He explains that the main cause of Arthur’s worry and grief is his loss of Lancelot, and the effects it will have on the Round Table:

the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here theroff, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge loved hym passyngly well. (1163.20-25)

The knowledge, or suspicion, of treason is one thing, but the outright, public accusation is another. Guinevere herself seems to lose priority here; it is not her betrayal that disturbs Arthur, but Lancelot’s. His prowess, his ability to have “done so much” for both of them is too important for Arthur to risk losing for anything less than proven treason. In fact,

⁴⁵ We have seen, however, that a similar situation in Béroul’s *Tristan* yields no such positive results.

⁴⁶ This is a marked difference from the Arthur of the Vulgate Cycle, who demands to know what the rumors are and insists that action be taken (372-373).

Arthur is more concerned in general with his knights than with his wife.⁴⁷ Heavily, Arthur gives permission to Aggravayne to wait for Lancelot, and take him into custody “quycke or dede” (1163.32). Arthur repeatedly evinces the same concern for Lancelot instead of Guinevere: “me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshup of the Round Table ys brokyn for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde. And now hit ys fallen so...that I may nat with my worship but my quene muste suffir dethe,’ and was sore amoved” (1174.13-18). Cherewatuk notes that “Arthur speaks here with the weariness of the injured party who has long known the truth of adultery. He also speaks as a king who immediately understands how adultery damns affinity politics, leaching men from him because of Launcelot” (49). Lancelot is the ideal of masculinity. His prowess and reputation, the very things for which Arthur loves him, will draw other men, Arthur’s men, to him. The victim of so many seduction plots himself, Lancelot is envisaged as seducing Arthur’s knights away, just as he has the queen. The discourse of treason forces all the men into action, whether they want to or not.

When the knights do try to capture him in Guinevere’s room, they continue to use the “grete worde” to taunt Lancelot into action. In this, however, they get a little ahead of themselves, telling him “Thou traytoure, sir Launcelot, now ar thou takyn!” (1165.18). They insult him repeatedly with the phrase “Traytoure knyght” (1166.5; 1167.31). Lancelot reacts accordingly. Like Arthur, he cannot let the charge stand. Luckily, he

⁴⁷ When Gawain suggests the grail quest, Arthur complains that ““for thorow yow he have berauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the worlde”” (866.20-23).

knows how to fight it: in battle. He challenges the accusing knights to a physical fight that will reveal what he claims is the truth: “and than lat hit be sene which of you all, other elis ye all, that woll deprave me of treson. And there shall I answeere you, as a knyght schulde, that hydir I cam to the quene for no maner of male engyne, and that woll I preve and make hit good uppon you wyth my hondys” (1168.6-10). He will take on anyone, or all of them, who dare to “deprave” him by calling him a traitor, following proper chivalric procedures by fighting them “as a knyght schulde.” Unlike his female opponents, his male accusers are fair game for physical violence. This is, perhaps, why Elaine is able to succeed and then escape his wrath. Lancelot stops himself from slaying Elaine; he has no such compunction about slaying the intruding knights.

Even though Lancelot defeats the knights and comes back to save Guinevere, the accusations of treason do not stop; in fact, they intensify. There is simply a different context. In the melee that ensues during Lancelot’s rescue of Guinevere, Lancelot accidentally slays the Orkney brothers, Gaherys and Gareth. This earns him not only Gawain’s hatred, but his frequent accusations of treason for killing fellow knights of the Round Table. Lancelot makes it clear that he will not tolerate such accusations. He warns Gawain to “charge me nat wyth treson nother felony” or he will be forced to fight him (1201.28). His men clearly understand the severity of the charge as well: once they hear Gawain call Lancelot a “false traytour” (1215.11; 1215.13), they tell him that he must fight: “Sir, now must you deffende you lyke a knyght, othir ellis ye be shamed for ever, for now ye be called uppon treson, hit ys tyme for you to styrre! For ye have slepte over longe, and suffirde overmuche” (1215.18-21). He has been living in a dream, they

suggest, perhaps lulled by his constant success, but now is the time to wake up. The equation is clear: “now ye be called upon treson, hit ys tyme for you to styrr!” Lancelot seems to realize the truth of the matter, and says that “now he chargith me with a grete charge” (1215.23-24). He explains to Arthur that “nedis I muste deffende myself, insomuch as Sir Gawayne hathe becalled me of treson” (1216.2-3). There is no question of fleeing treason anymore. Unless Gawain stops “the fowle sayinge” (1219.5), there is going to be more violence. When Gawain does not stop, Lancelot warns him that “syttthen that ye unknyghtly calle me thus of treson, ye shall have bothe youre hondys fulle of me” (1219.17-19). Such charges must lead to combat, to a violent refutation through the body, the “hondys,” of a crime that occurs in the mind and heart. There must be an answer, and that answer must be physical.

The language of treason is thus so powerful that it supersedes anything else. This is, perhaps, most interesting in terms of a study of Lancelot because it seems that he is so afraid of the treason charge that he cannot admit, even to himself, that any of it is true. His constant defense of Guinevere is perhaps admirable; as noted, he defends her to every woman who tries to get him for her own, and he defends her with his speech and his body from man who charges her with treason. But this defense is a lie, a lie he feeds to even his closest kin and friends.⁴⁸ In a lengthy defense, he tries to persuade Arthur to take Guinevere back, rejecting the notion that he is a traitor or that Guinevere has been unfaithful. As it conveys many of the threads under discussion here, it is worth quoting in

⁴⁸ Bors points out that “whether ye ded ryght othir wronge, hit ys now your parte to holdy wyth the quene, that she be nat slayne and put to a myschevous deth” (1171.30-32). The aside “whether ye ded ryght othir wronge” suggests that Bors knows all too well what was probably happening in Guinevere’s room.

full. Lancelot moves consistently between her innocence, his ability to defeat any challenge to that idea, and his honor and status as the leading knight:

there nys no knyght undir hevyn that dare make hit good uppon me that ever I was traytour unto youre person. And where hit please you to say that ai have holdyn my lady, youre quene, yerys and winters, unto that I shall ever make a large answere, and prove hit uppon ony knyght that beryth the lyff, excepte your person and sir Gawayne, that my lady, quene Gwennyver, ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys ony lady lyvyng unto her lorde, and that woll I make good with my hondis. (1188.8-16)

Lancelot seems to have a very narrow definition of treason here; in saying that he was never a “traytour unto youre person” he may simply be arguing that he has never threatened Arthur’s life. But this is the same Lancelot who called Elaine a “traytours” for deceiving him into having sex with her. The undefined nature of treason, all the way back to the Pentecostal Oath, comes back to haunt everyone. He insists on Guinevere’s innocence, but the proof is once again in his body, his “hondis.” As Wallace notes, “Problems arise...if one knight can never lose; and Launcelot is routinely acknowledged as the best knight in the world” (“Malory” 238). Lancelot’s words here are clearly a threat. He knows he will win.

Moreover, he calls Arthur out on his bad lordship, once again deflecting his own guilt:

for oftyntymes, my lorde, ye have concented that she sholde have be brente and destroyed in youre hete, and than hit fortunede me to do batayle for her, and or I departed from her adversary they confessed there untrouth, and she full worsshypfull excused. And at suche tymes, my lorde Arthur...ye loved me and thanked me whan I saved your quene frome the fyre, and than ye promysed me for ever to be my good lorde. And now methynkth ye rewarde me full evyll for my good servyse. (1188.19-27)

Arthur, Lancelot suggests, has not only been wrong before about Guinevere, but has relied on Lancelot to fight for her. He has shirked his husbandly duty. Worse, he has broken his promise to his knight. Like Arthur, Lancelot is privileging the bonds between men, in this case a king and his most worthy knight. Arthur has foolishly made an idealized pledge, an untenable one “for ever to be [his] good lorde.” Lancelot is thus desperately confused by the change. But he is also deeply in denial, ignoring the truth and focusing on the physical judgment that has served him so well.

He details his own losses, once again pointing to the damage it would do his reputation if he failed to save Guinevere. Lancelot has it all worked out, full of plausible denials of what his relationship with Guinevere is really about and why his honor would suffer if he failed to save her:

‘And, my lorde, mesemyth I had lost a grete parte of my worship in my knyghthod and I had suffird my lady, youre quene, to have ben brente, insomuche as she shoulde have bene brente for my sake: for sytthen I have done batayles for youre quene in other quarrles than in myne owne quarrel, mesymyth now I had more ryght to do batayle for her in her ryght quarrel. And therefore, my good and gracious lorde...take your quene unto youre good grace, for she ys both tru and good.’ (1188.28-36)

Even when he has returned her, he makes it clear that he will fight anyone who accuses Guinevere, repeating it for good measure (1197.7-8; 1202.20). It is his “ryght.” Lancelot then tells Gawain flatly that his version must be the truth because the accusers “preved nat hemselff the best, nother in the ryht” (1197.30-31). Might makes right, and as the mightiest, he does not have to think too hard about what is actually right.

The only time Lancelot even comes close to acknowledging his guilt is during the grail quest. He realizes that “all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste

party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit right other wronge. And never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wynne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved, and litill or nough I thanked never God of hit” (897.17-122). For a brief moment, it seems as if Lancelot has the clarity and space to bring himself to terms with his actions and their consequences. His focus has always been Guinevere, his love for her and his need to win public honor to keep that love. But even the hermit who confesses him knows that Lancelot will not be able to give up the queen, chastising him that he “wolt nat leve thy sinne for no goodness that God hath sente” (898.3). The hermit proves prophetic: absence makes the heart grow fonder. The very next section of the *Morte*, “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” begins with the information that he starts the affair again as soon as he is back:

...sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promise and the perfeccion that he made in the queste: for as the booke seyth, had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. But ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene, and so they loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde, and had many such prevy draughtis togydir that many in the courte spake of hit, and in especiall sir Aggravayne, sir Gawayne’s brother, for he was ever opine-mowthed. (1045.10-21)

His inability to refrain from seeing her or thinking of her, even after he has seen the consequences of his sinful ways, is a testament to their love, but it is also the beginning of a spiral into distrust and destruction that ruins Arthur’s kingdom.⁴⁹ The treasonous discourse actually intensifies; it is on his return, on the resumption of their “hotter” love

⁴⁹ Armstrong argues that “his spiritual instability is in fact due to his stability of character; he fails in the Grail Quest because he continues to follow the code of behavior that has brought him such renown” (150-151).

and “prevy draughtis” that the rumors increase and the formal accusations start. The “opine-mowthed” Aggravain, as we have seen, will succeed in provoking Arthur to act, and Gawain will follow with inciting language of his own.

Lancelot admits his guilt only elliptically, telling Guinevere at the end that he could have won the Sankgreall ““had nat youre love bene”” (1253.14). The syntax still displaces any personal guilt. As Cowen argues, “Malory’s usual concern is not to analyse the growth of emotions in individual characters, but to show the way in which an intricate set of human relationships issues in action” (36). Lancelot’s love for Guinevere has been his motivating factor, a grand, passionate, ennobling love that is still a deep betrayal Lancelot refuses to face. When Guinevere dies, and he buries her with Arthur, he is moved “how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed full owe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of christen people” (1256.33-35). This is his strongest admission of guilt, but is still, characteristically, vague. His “defaute” is not explained explicitly, and his “orgule” and “pryde” cover a multitude of sins. Moreover, though Guinevere makes a good Christian ending, as an adulterer she was not in any way a “pereles” Christian. Lancelot holds to his idealized image of both of them until the very end, never mentioning his own betrayal explicitly. Still, he is rewarded in death, being taken up to heaven (1258.7-11), and happier as a corpse than he was as a living, tormented body: “and he laye as he had smyled, and the swettest savour aboute hym” (1258.16-17).

Lancelot’s refusal to acknowledge his own guilt is, perhaps, a character flaw that Malory seems to glance over, or, as Cherewatuk would have it, a form of Malory’s own

denial. But it also reflects the problems inherent in not just a legal system but a whole culture that places its trust in physical prowess, one that both enables and is enabled by the gendered codes that prevail throughout the text.⁵⁰ As long as Lancelot knows that law, order, and truth will be defined by battles, and he knows that he will always win in battle, he does not have to admit the possibility of his own guilt, legal or otherwise. Despite the feminizing situations in which he finds himself, it is his very masculinity that allows him to remain in denial. As a man who can always prove innocence through might, he need never worry about his guilt, his treason. This is, ultimately, a luxury that Guinevere cannot have.

Guinevere: “trew” and false

Guinevere is also inextricably linked to treason in Malory’s text, though not as explicitly as Lancelot. She is accused of two primary treasons in the text, murder and adultery. She faces three trials, and three attempts to punish her, each escalating in intensity and suggesting the idea of her guilt differently. Her role in Sir Patryse’s death, unknowingly giving him the poisoned apple (thus recalling Eve), demonstrates a tension between her intent and her actions. The ensuing trial by battle is another way in which anxiety about mental space is expressed through a need to control it via embodiment, in particular a male body representing and controlling an unknowable female body. In her second trial, she is actually innocent of the specific charge of adultery, but guilty of

⁵⁰ R. Howard Bloch has made a similar case for the *Mort Artu*, arguing that even the earlier text displays an anxiety over the judicial processes of kingly recusal and trial by combat. However, he does not take the step of connecting this argument to gender codes, nor does he examine its application to the *Morte*. See his *Medieval French Literature and Law*, especially chapter one. Armstrong, in *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, does make a consistent case for the problems inherent in the gendered codes of justice; however, treason is not a main focus for her.

adultery with Lancelot instead. Only in the third trial, when she and Lancelot have been caught together in her room, is she entangled solely because of her own actions. For all her transgressions, though, Guinevere makes a holy end. Malory never denounces her for her betrayal of Arthur, and in fact makes “a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefore she had a good ende” (1120.12-13). She is thus an excellent figure on which to end this study of treason in the Middle Ages. She is accused of treason more explicitly and more frequently than any other character, male or female. In fact, the different elements of Guinevere’s betrayal recall those of other key figures in my discussion: like Ganelon, her trials stir debate and fracture within her society; like Iseut, she engages in an affair with her husband’s most trusted lord and is threatened with horrible punishment but is never explicitly condemned for it by the narrator; and like Criseyde, her romantic entanglement is a factor in the destruction of her kingdom. At the same time, she is a perfect counterexample to the unrepentant and unpunished men of the *Legend of Good Women*. She is truly penitent, having the strength and pragmatism to reject Lancelot even after Arthur’s death means that they could be together legitimately. Unlike Lancelot, Guinevere has to face the treason charges not in the form of rumors and innuendo, but in real fires that threaten real pain and death. She faces the most danger from her treason, but comes through it stronger.

Guinevere is a key figure in Arthur’s kingdom from the beginning, bringing both stability and instability. She not only makes Arthur a “valyaunte” wife (97.20), but gives

him the literal Round Table and one hundred of its knights (98.20).⁵¹ Without her, as many scholars point out, there is no Round Table, and only a small band of knights for Arthur; thus she provides key pieces of Arthur's kingdom, even if she does not provide him with an heir. Cherewatuk argues, convincingly, that "Guenevere's dowry, the Round Table, substitutes for legitimate offspring, which her marriage to Arthur does not produce" (xxv). Her barrenness, like Iseut's, is never mentioned in the text. Her two lovers, Arthur and Lancelot, both produce children (Borre and Mordred for Arthur, Galahad for Lancelot), indicating that her childless state reflects her own inability to produce children.⁵² This was not ideal in a medieval queen, whose primary function was to provide an heir and continue the king's line. Yet this is not the only flaw in her marriage to Arthur. He loves her, but does not go into the marriage blind; Merlin has advised him "that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot sholde love hir, and sche hym agayne" (97.30-31). Edwards notes that "The warning about adultery is something Malory has added, with the effect of putting the entire marriage, from its inception, under suspicion" (44).⁵³ Yet this dire

⁵¹ Hodges notes that "Arthur gives it [valiance] precedence over her beauty" (39); Cherewatuk makes the same point (32).

⁵² As Cherewatuk maintains: "Despite the optimistic start to Arthur and Guenevere's marriage, personal, political and dynastic tragedy reside in the queen's body, in the twinned problems of barrenness and adultery" (24). Sarah J. Hill points out that "the birth of a son mitigates any crime or deviation from Christian morality," (270). She points to Elaine's birth of Galahad as an example, along with the more disturbing examples of Igrayne's rape by Uther and Torre's mother's rape by Pellinor. However, it seems unclear to me whether a child would have helped or hurt Guinevere, given the notoriety of her affair. Without a child, Arthur can ignore the affair for longer. See her "Recovering Malory's Guenevere." *In Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. Ed. Lori J. Walters. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. 267-277.

⁵³ But Arthur is adamant, which, as Batt points out, makes the reader wonder "why Arthur ignores the message" (54). Edwards notes that "The warning about adultery is something Malory has added, with the effect of putting the entire marriage, from its inception, under suspicion" (44).

prediction fades to the background as she becomes an integral part of the culture, holding court at the trials of those accused of missteps in their duties to women. Unlike typical medieval queens, Hodges points out, “Guinevere is not an intercessor. More often than Arthur, she is the judge of difficult cases” (131). She is a loyal, loved, and worthy queen whose sporadic appearances early in the text all show her as “a positive force” (Cherewatuk 36).⁵⁴ But she is tainted from the beginning.

Arthur, though, ignores every warning about Guinevere that he gets throughout the book. Despite his affairs before he marries Guinevere, one of which, of course, produces Mordred, Arthur remains faithful to her once he is married.⁵⁵ Yet he knows from the start that Guinevere will be unfaithful. He gets several hints about his wife’s affair, all of which he chooses to dismiss. For one thing, Morgan sends him, via Tristram, a shield that depicts a knight standing on a king and a queen. Initially, it seems that the knight might represent either Lancelot or Mordred; both wreak havoc on Arthur’s kingdom through their dealing with the queen. But Malory makes it clear that the knight is Lancelot; in addition to causing trouble for Arthur, Morgan wants Lancelot for herself (555.1-9), as the episode of the four queens has already shown. Arthur examines the shield, and “mervayled gretly in what entente hit was made. But quene Gwennyver demed as hit was, wherefore she was hevvy” (557.27-29). This is, perhaps, part of the “demyng” of the affair Arthur admits to once it is revealed. Ultimately, Arthur is not convinced, even when a damsel spells the shield’s purpose out for him: “to warn you of your shame

⁵⁴ Armstrong makes the same point (57).

⁵⁵ In the *Foreyste Perelous*, the sorceress Aunowre tries her best to seduce Arthur, but he refuses her advances when he “remembird hym of hys lady” (490.18-19).

and dishonoure that longith to you and youre quene” (557.34-35). He says nothing, does nothing, but “ever kynge Arthurs ye was on that shyld” (558.18-19).

Arthur gets another warning about the affair, again from someone with ulterior motives: King Mark of Cornwall. As he is in a similar situation, Mark could make a fairly sympathetic figure. However, his reactions, and his constant treasonous and irrational behavior prevent anyone from taking him seriously. Upon receiving warning letters from Arthur, telling him to stop persecuting Tristram, Mark sends Arthur a letter back in which he taunts Arthur about his ability to “rule his wyff and his knyghtes” (617.9). This makes Arthur think back to the shield and Morgan’s warning. But the fact that these warnings come from enemies is enough to allow him to dismiss the ideas: “Than he bethought hym agayne how his owne sister was his enemy, and that she hated the quene and sir Launcelot to the deth, and so he put that all oute of his thought” (617.14-16). As Mark is also a known coward and traitor, Arthur reassures himself that the warnings are simply spite. Once again, treasons in the text are connected, both leading to more treasons and helping conceal others. It is Morgan and Mark’s reputations for troublemaking and treachery that allow Arthur to ignore the treason going on right under his nose. Moreover, Arthur clouds the issue by supporting Tristram and Isode’s adulterous affair. Upon meeting her, he tells her that “mesemeth ye ar well beset todgydir” (757.16-17). Some adultery, it seems, is perfectly acceptable, so long as it does not include his own wife, and he does not have to acknowledge it publically.

Throughout the bulk of the *Morte*, it is Lancelot who faces accusations about their relationship, perhaps because he is the one to leave the court and encounter strangers

more often. But starting with “The Poisoned Apple,” the focus on treason shifts to Guinevere. Lancelot may face three assaults on his sexual fidelity to Guinevere, but Guinevere faces three state treason trials. As Armstrong points out, “Three times Lancelot saves Guenevere from being ‘brent,’ and each time, the socially divisive impact of his act of rescue increases” (176). It is not, thus, just the trials themselves, but Lancelot’s always successful rescues that are problematic. Complicating matters even further is the fact that the first two of her treason trials stem from treasons for which she is in no way responsible. She is, as so many in the *Morte* are, pulled into treasonous situations through no apparent fault of her own, despite the fact that she is, simultaneously, betraying her husband and king. This dizzying cycle of guilt and innocence is what makes her such an important figure for the discussion of treason in the Middle Ages.

The first treason of which she is accused involves Lancelot only peripherally, at first glance, but proves to have roots in their relationship. After returning from the failed grail quest, Lancelot has resumed his affair with the queen. If anything, Malory suggests, the passion has increased, and is “more hotter than” before. To quell the rumors, Lancelot starts to distance himself from Guinevere: “ever as much as he might he withdrew hym fro the company of quene Gwentyvere for to eschew the sclawndir and noyse” (1045.26-28). But his plan backfires, and a frustrated Guinevere “waxed wrothe” (1045.29). She accuses him of losing his taste for her: “I se and fele dayly that youre love begynnyth to slake, for ye have no joy to be in my presence, but ever ye ar oute of thys courte, and quarrels and maters ye have nowadays for ladyes, madyns and jantillwomen” (1045.32-

1046.1). Their own relationship, it turns out, is not without problems, and fears of betrayal. He explains that he is simply trying to stop the “many men” who “spekith of our love in thys courte and have you and me gretely in awayte” (1046.15-17). He knows that they are playing a dangerous game.

Ironically, Lancelot’s worries about the escalation of the rumors of their affair ultimately spur Guinevere right into her first trial for treason. Along with his concern for his own reputation, he fears for Guinevere as well, showing a much higher degree of awareness of her plight than Tristram does for Iseut or, even, Troilus does for Criseyde. He explains that if they are caught, “I may happyn to ascape and ryde myself in a grete nede where, madame, ye must abyde all that woll be seyde unto you. And than, if that ye falle in ony distress thorowoute wyllfull foly, than ys there not other remedy other helpe but by me and my bloode” (1046.19-24). Well aware of their gendered positions, he knows that he will be able to defend himself, unlike Guinevere, who must simply “abyde.” Lancelot warns her that “the boldnesses of you and me woll brynge us to shame and sclaundir, and that were me lothe to se you dishonoured. And that is the cause I take upon me more for to do for damsels and maydyns than ever y ded toforne, that men sholde undirstonde my joy and my delite ys my pleasure to have ado for damsels and maydyns” (1046.25-31).⁵⁶ Just as the knights fall out with each other, the lovers do.

⁵⁶ Guinevere, it must be noted, is also conscious of the rumors; when she hears that Lancelot is skipping the tournament at Ascolat, as she is, she chides him: “Sir, ye ar gretly to blame thus to holde you behynde my lorde. What woll youre enemyes and myne sey and deme?” (1065.31-32). In a fairly revealing and comic moment, she answers her own question, imagining what people will say: “Se how sir Launcelot holdith hym ever behynde the kynge, and so the quene doth also, for that they wolde have their pleasure togydires” (1066.1-3). However, her request is simply for him to participate, not to parade his devotion to any lady in particular.

Lancelot is trying not only to protect them, but also to reclaim an identity for himself that is separate from Guinevere. This identity seems to be for “men,” in particular; the rumors from ladies he can handle, but it is men who can back up rumors with action, and who are thus more worrying. Yet his very concern about their reputations, and the choice he makes to fight publically for other ladies, begins the process by which Guinevere will be accused of treason for the first time.

Guinevere is not interested in his reasons for spreading his “joy” and “delite.” In another example of how betrayal seems to spread in the text, she accuses her adulterous lover of being unfaithful to her: “thou arte a false, recrayed knyght and a common lechourere, and lovyste and holdiste other ladyes, and of me thou haste dysdayne and scorne” (1047.1-4). She takes the serious step of banishing him from her sight and the court on pain of death (1047.5-9). This is not a spat; these are strong words, serious accusations of falseness and threats of death.⁵⁷ When Lancelot, therefore, follows her command and leaves, Guinevere attempts to put on an equal show of disinterest: “the quene outwarde made no maner of sorrow in shewyng to none of his bloode nore to none other, but wyte ye well, inwardely, as the booke seythe, she toke grete thought; but she bare hit oute with a proude countenancue, as thoughe she felte no thought nother daungere” (1048.6-11). Guinevere, like Lancelot, is going to try to reestablish an identity separate from the rumors of their affair. If Lancelot is going to go on a public relations

⁵⁷ Taking on the idea that Guinevere’s angry reactions to Lancelot’s missteps “are often read as unreasonable, erratic, and, wincingly, as expressions of irrational femininity,” Kaufman points out that “When we consider Malory’s designation of Guenevere as a ‘trew lover, ‘however, her repeated accusations that Lancelot is being ‘false’ take on new meaning” (80-81).

tour to readjust his image, Guinevere is going to do the same within her own sphere.⁵⁸ She sets up a dinner “to shew outwardly that she had as grete joy in all other knyghtes of the Rounde Table as she had in sir Launcelot” (1048.13-15). Hodges argues that “read romantically, her dinner is a petty and malicious stab at Launcelot; read politically, it is an admirable and necessary attempt to reassert control over and bring peace to increasingly divided affinities” (136).⁵⁹ Guinevere was once a formidable presence at court, and the dinner party is perhaps her way of trying to return to that status. But as Kaufman points out, this “attempt to be ‘false,’ to suppress her interiority and drape herself in social façade...fails so miserably that it endangers her life” (82). There is no returning to that role.

Her dinner plans go severely awry, due to treachery that is not hers at all. The “divided affinities” to which Hodges alludes rear their ugly heads. Pynell le Saveayge is at the dinner; he is a cousin of Lamerok, whom Gawain and his brothers “slew by treson” earlier in the text (1048.26).⁶⁰ Pynell has poisoned an apple in the hopes that Gawain, who loves apples, will eat it (1049.2-5). Unfortunately for Pynell, the apple goes to

⁵⁸ See Edwards for a discussion of male and female spaces (*op.cit.*).

⁵⁹ He makes the larger point that the motive of jealousy typically ascribed to Guinevere here is slightly unfair: “A number of her actions that readers often attribute to jealousy may instead be prompted by politics as she struggles to hold together the Round Table fellowship” (130).

⁶⁰ Irene Joynt points out that this is a deliberate change from the *Mort Artu*, in which it is not Pynell but Arvalan, a random knight, who poisons the apple, and for no clear reason. She sees this as a link between “the two elements of the blood feud and the love of Lancelot and Guenevere” that precipitate the climax (95). See her “Vengeance and Love in ‘The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere.’” *Arthurian Literature III*. Ed. Richard Barber. 91-112.

Patryse. Unfortunately for Guinevere, she is the one who gives it to him.⁶¹ Blame falls almost immediately upon Guinevere: “And there opynly sir Mador appeled the quene of the deth of hys cousin sir Patryse” (1049.28-29). But the charge is not simple murder; once Arthur arrives, “sir Mador stood styлле before the kynge and appeled the quene of treson. (For the custom was such at that tyme that all maner of shameful deth was called treson” (1050.1-3). This is one of what Kelly calls “Malory’s invented treason laws,” as murder and treason were separate offenses in English law (117). Tellingly, just as Aggravayne manipulates the discourse of treason to provoke Arthur into action against Lancelot, Mador uses it here to force Arthur to deal with the murder of his brother. Yet Malory pauses to make it clear that Guinevere is innocent, in mind if not in deed. She laments that “I made thys dyner for a good entente and never for none evyll,” (1050.28-29) and that “I was never purposed to do such evyll dedes” (1050.30-31). Like Criseyde, she tries to explain that she did not mean for anything bad to happen. Like Criseyde, her intent matters less than what the men around her perceive it to be. Everyone assumes she is guilty.

Everyone, that is, except Arthur. Although Arthur becomes progressively more doubtful about his wife’s innocence, in this first instance he is solidly behind her. He seems frustrated that he cannot participate in her defense himself, but certain that she is innocent. As he explains, “the case ys so I may nat have ado in thys mater, for I muste be a ryghtfull juge. And that repentith me that I may nat do batayle for my wyff, for, as I

⁶¹ The biblical imagery is clear. Cherewatuk points out that “Malory’s discomfort with the values of courtly adultery is also evident in Queen Guenevere’s decline into the role of sexual temptress while her partner Launcelot receives little blame. Malory evokes a link between Guenevere and the church’s archetypal temptress, Eve, through quite specific imagery” (42).

deme, thys dede com never by her” (1050.5-8). Like Lancelot, he knows that the truth will be decided in battle, in men facing men, not in what he, as her husband or king, can “deme.” As king, Arthur is not just any man. He cannot bend the rules to fight for her, and he cannot change the punishment at hand. He laments that if no one steps up, “than muste my quene be brente” (1051.4). His reference to her as his queen, not his wife, signifies that this is a procedural matter, and the chivalric community as a whole places great trust in procedure.⁶² Ironically, he asks where Lancelot can be, for “if he were here he wolde nat grucche to do batayle for you” (1051.11). In a scene that can be read as simply lighthearted teasing, a genuine inquiry, or a pointed question, he asks Guinevere “What aylith you...that ye can nat kepe sir Launcelot upon youre side?” (1051.29-30).⁶³ Their earlier fight, thus, has more severe consequences than either can have imagined.

With both her husband and her lover apparently unavailable, Guinevere must turn elsewhere for her champion. She looks to one of Lancelot’s men, Bors. Hodges claims that “Her increasing dependence on Launcelot’s party (especially Bors in Launcelot’s absence) shows that her affinity is becoming distinct from Arthur’s” (132). But when Bors initially turns down Guinevere’s request that he be her champion in Lancelot’s stead, Arthur takes matters into his own hands and asks Bors directly (1051.25-29).

⁶² As Armstrong claims, “That Arthur does not fight for Guenevere due to his need to be a ‘ryghful juge’ indicates an attempt on the part of the king to portray chivalric judgment as fair and just, not determined by mere physical strength and skill” (179). She notes that “The trial-by-arms that Malory here depicts was an accepted form of deciding legal disputes in the Court of Chivalry, which, after the Statute of Treasons of 1352, was defined as a proper venue for settling serious criminal charges brought by one noble against another” (179).

⁶³ Armstrong argues that Arthur’s assumption that Lancelot will fight for her signals “a *de facto* exchange of the queen” (188), going so far as to claim that “one could say that Arthur has in all but name ‘married’ Guenevere to Lancelot, accruing a reward similar to that which a brother or father receives upon marrying off a sister or daughter: an alliance with another man” (189). This is perhaps stretching the case, but it is supported by Lancelot’s already-noted argument that Arthur has always relied on him to save Guinevere.

Although he cannot help her himself, Arthur does not abandon her. Here it is clearly Bors's duty to Arthur which makes him accept the charge, not any duty to Guinevere in Lancelot's stead. For this crime, and at this stage, during the first treason trial, not only is Guinevere actually innocent, but she is believed to be by Arthur.

Yet she is still brought to the fire to await the battle that will decide if she lives or dies. Despite Larry C. Benson's assertions that "Nothing much happens here" (222), and that "nothing bad happens to the central characters" (223), this is a crucial scene because it sets a precedent for what is to be done with Guinevere.⁶⁴ Malory, who has already had to explain the legal issues of the past to explain why the murder charge is also a treason charge, is careful to explain the difference in this procedure from contemporary law. Guinevere is taken into custody, and the fire is prepared ahead of time: "so the quene was than put in the Conestablis awarde and a grete fyre made aboute an iron stake, that an sir Mador de la Parte had the bettir, she sholde there be brente; for such custom was used on tho dayes: for favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente, as well upon a kynge as upon a knyght, and as well upon a quene as upon another poure lady" (1055.9-15). Ostensibly, the law is about class and gender equality: everyone is subject to "ryghtuous jugemente," no matter his or her station. But Batt notes that there is something disturbing in the fact that such preparations always seem to be at the ready to punish Guinevere, whose guilt, within the form of a loss in the trial by battle, is always assumed when Lancelot is not there (169). There is nothing Guinevere can do

⁶⁴ Moreover, being brought to the stake, helpless to do anything but watch a substitute champion fight a reluctant battle does not seem especially *good*. See his "The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*." *A Companion to Malory*. Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 1996. 221-238.

to help herself, doomed to be fought over and judged, interpreted, by the men around her. Armstrong makes the point that “A man at least has recourse to his sword, while a woman, deliberately constructed in the direction, focus, and language of the Pentecostal Oath as passive, submissive, and marginal, has recourse only to her father, husband, or brother” (181).⁶⁵ Guinevere, here, does not even have these.

The resolution of the first trial reveals the problems inherent in a system whereby guilt is determined by battle. As Mador and Bors prepare to fight to determine her guilt or innocent, Bors finally decides that she “ys nat culpable of thys treson that is put upon her” (1055.23-24). Even more importantly, however, he points out that if it was not Guinevere who poisoned the apple, then it must have been one of the knights: “howsomever the game goth, there was treson amonge us” (1054.16-21). Armstrong notes that in this speech “lies the suggestion that the judicial mechanism by which guilt or innocence is decided in the chivalric community is imperfect” (181). Bors is not only pointing out that someone in the Round Table is disloyal, treacherous to the point of murder, but that the battle may not reveal the truth of the matter at all. Even defending Guinevere successfully will not disclose the name of the real murderer. The efficacy of the trial by battle is also weakened by the fact that Lancelot rides up at the last minute to save her. He defeats Mador and demands “that no mencion be made upon sir Patryseys tombe that ever quene Gweynver consented to that treson” (1058.1-3).⁶⁶ The men, thus,

⁶⁵ Armstrong says, “Significantly, trial by combat is the sole means of settling disputes in the Arthurian chivalric society, an act that women clearly are unable to perform in their own defense; as king, Arthur cannot risk the royal person and defend his wife” (180).

⁶⁶ Oddly, there is still mention of the accusation on the tomb: “that quene Gweynvere was appeled of treson” (1059.32-33). Malory explains that “All thys was wretyn upon the tombe of sir Patryse in excusing

are literally writing the history of the woman, recording even the deeds she did not do on the tombstone for all to see.

Interestingly, Nynyve comes to reveal the true murderer, exonerating Guinevere once and for all (1059.15-20).⁶⁷ Thus there is another hint that trial by battle is not the most trustworthy; the opinion has to be confirmed independently, and by a woman, a sorceress at that. Tellingly, upon being released, Guinevere goes straight to Arthur, “and aythir kissed othir hartely” (1058.9-10). All seems to be well between the king and his queen. Guinevere and Lancelot also make up: Guinevere feels guilty “that he had done to her so grete kyndenes where she shewed hym grete unkyndenesse” (1059.1-2). As Hodges argues, “When Launcelot rescues Guinevere from death in the affair of the poisoned apple, he is serving his God, his king, his lover, and his chivalry all at once. But the moment passes, and the chivalric values move again into conflict” (28). The other trials will prove this.

Guinevere’s second trial for treason shifts from a murder charge to one of adultery. Yet like the first trial, the second one begins when she is caught up in the treacherous plot of another knight. She herself is the target this time, not the unwitting instrument. Mellyagaunt, whom Malory explains earlier in the book is in love with Guinevere (485.5-7), has decided to abduct her. This is, of course, clear and recognizable treason according to the 1352 Statute; there is no reason to assume that his abduction-rape is not the first step in a planned sexual assault-rape. Mellyagaunt ambushes her and

of the quene” (1060.1-2). This may, of course, be a holdover from the French source, but as Malory has altered so much of the narrative, leaving in this detail seems pointed.

⁶⁷ Armstrong makes the same point (182).

her ten guardian knights, but Guinevere manages to ward off any assault against herself and to protect her knights from being killed at the same time (1123.7-15). After the ordeal, she has her wounded knights sleep in her chamber (1130.24-27). This act of kindness proves to be her undoing as their presence in her chamber allows Mellyagaunt to misread—partially—the scene of Guinevere’s bloody bed on the following morning.

Ironically, Mellyagaunt’s thwarted attempt at treason leads to the only explicit scene of Lancelot and Guinevere’s sexual affair in the whole text, and it is this night of passion that serves as the real cause for the false accusations of treason to follow.⁶⁸ While the wounded knights are still in the chamber sleeping, Lancelot secretly climbs up her window and “wysshed that he might have comyn in to her” (1131.12-13). Malory makes the conversation, and the mutual desire, as clear as possible. Instead of a simple yes, Guinevere says “I wolde as fayne as ye that ye might com in to me” (1131.14-15). Lancelot, in a display of both his eagerness and his masculine strength, pulls the bars apart, cutting his hand (1131.24). What happens next is clear, despite Malory’s attempt to rush through any description: “So, to passe upon thys tale, sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawning of the day, for wyte you well he slept nat, but wacched” (1131.28-32). Interestingly, after Guinevere’s active role in defending herself, she is relegated to the passive. It is Lancelot who “toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng.”

⁶⁸ Hodges calls it “the one unambiguous instance of Guinevere’s adultery” (144), while Armstrong notes that it is “unequivocal confirmation” (182). Armstrong argues that Malory’s moving of this scene, from the earlier “Noble Tale” section in the *Prose* version to the “Cart” section of the *Morte* is evidence of his reluctance to confirm the affair (183).

At the same time, in keeping with Lancelot's occasional feminization, it is he who bleeds in her bed.⁶⁹

Lancelot leaves the encounter unscathed (except for the bleeding), but Guinevere does not. The evidence left behind becomes the basis for the second accusation of treason against her. In a rude gesture, Mellyagaunt opens her bed curtains in the morning, sees the blood, and assumes that she has been sleeping with one of the wounded knights in her chamber (1132.8-14). Mellyagaunt clearly reads this as treason. Paul Strohm has pointed out the dilemma Mellyagaunt is in, arguing that he is "condemned to an act of interpretation, and carries it forward in the most reasonable and empirical way, only to fall short of anything approaching an account of what has actually transpired" ("Primal Scene" 203).⁷⁰ Calling her "a false traytouras unto my lorde Arthur," Mellyagaunt swears to Guinevere to "calle you of treson afore my lorde kynge Arthure" (1132.16; 1132.9). He is clearly delighted to have caught her in treacherous adultery, for reasons of both spite and self-preservation. Malory makes his motives clear: "he demed by that to hyde hys owne treson" (1133.44). In fact, when Mellyagaunt formally accuses her, he takes things one step further and "appeled the quen of hyghe treson" (1135.14); this is the first mention of high treason in the whole text. The charges here are difficult to pinpoint given the actual treason laws of England during the late Middle Ages; as noted, according to the

⁶⁹ This clearly recalls the similar scene of masculine bleeding in Béroul's *Tristan*; Cherewatuk makes the same point (15). In his reading of this scene in Chrétien, Cohen notes that "the masculine body has become feminine. Or else masculine and feminine (along with lover/beloved, master/servant, vassal/lord, public/private) have temporarily lost their relational signifying power, each bifurcation blurring to the point at which it is no longer possible to contain them" (249).

⁷⁰ See his "Mellyagaunt's Primal Scene." *Theory and the Premodern Text*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 201-214.

1352 Statute, treason charges could only be brought against the male defendant accused of sleeping with the queen, eldest princess, or eldest son's queen. But as we have seen, Malory sees fit to adapt laws as necessary; murder was not automatically treason in England, either, though it seems to be in Arthur's court. Moreover, Mellyagaunt does not claim to know which knight Guinevere has slept with—and he has no idea that Lancelot was there at all.⁷¹ It would be impossible to charge a particular man. Guinevere, though, bound to her room, lying in her own bloodied bed, is an easy target.

Once again, Guinevere is “broughte tyll a fyre to be brente” (1137.6-7); once again, Arthur believes her. However, this is not necessarily due to any faith in his wife. Arthur believes his men: “For I have spokyn with all the ten wounded knyghtes, and there ys nat one of them, and he were hole and able to do batayle, but he wolde prove upon sir Mellyagaunce body” (1137.25-28). She has kept her knights from being killed by Mellyagaunt, and they return the favor, not only swearing her innocence but offering to fight were they not wounded. As Hodges notes, “Guinevere actually enjoys more and broader political support” here than she did during the first trial (141). But the key irony is that Guinevere *is* guilty of adultery here—more clearly guilty here than anywhere else in the text. She just is not guilty of adultery with these specific knights. Yet Lancelot rides to the rescue again.⁷² He easily defeats Mellyagaunt in battle, fighting him to the

⁷¹ It seems that the rumors of Guinevere's affair with Lancelot have left her open to general suspicion of adultery.

⁷² Only, it must be noted, after a kind of betrayal himself; he must give a lady a kiss to escape from the prison in which he is being held captive (1135.25-26).

death at Guinevere's command.⁷³ As Strohm points out, the treason "rebounds" back onto Mellyagaunt (208). Similar to the first of Guinevere's treason trials, this one ends fairly happily: "And than the kyng and the quene made more of sir Launcelot, and more was he cherysshed than ever he was aforehande" (1140.11-12). The first two treason trials, then, are based on different charges, murder and adultery, but follow a similar pattern: a knight accuses Guinevere of treason in a situation that does not involve Lancelot at all; Arthur believes in her innocence, and helps her as much as he can; Guinevere is brought to the fire but saved by Lancelot; she is technically innocent of both charges, and Lancelot's rescue of her is cause for celebration.

The final treason charge, however, is radically different. For one thing, it is a result of their own actions. As discussed earlier, Aggravayn has goaded Arthur into letting him try to catch Lancelot and Guinevere by using the discourse of treason to force Arthur's hand. They are caught in her room together. Malory is famously (and inefficiently) coy about what they are doing in there: "For, as the Freynshe book seyth, the quene and sir Launcelot were togydirs. And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyst nat therof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays" (1165.10-13).⁷⁴ Ultimately, though, what they were actually up to does not seem to matter. When the knights barge the door, they are already crying that

⁷³ Hodges notes that Guinevere's signal to Lancelot to continue the battle, despite Mellyagaunt's submission, "is like a consultation between a defendant and her attorney on whether to accept a plea agreement" (146). Guinevere's desire for total vindication makes sense given her previous accusations of treason. Moreover, Mellyagaunt has not only attempted to abduct her, with the clear possibility of rape, but has also tried to engineer her death once he has submitted to her. She is simply being practical, not vengeful. Kaufman argues that Guinevere has given up on language here, simply nodding to Lancelot to tell him what to do (84).

⁷⁴ Many scholars point out that it is clear in Malory's source, the Vulgate version, that they are in bed together. Armstrong, for example, notes that "Malory hedges" (190).

Lancelot is a “traytoure.” For another, having had two trial runs, literally, Guinevere appreciates just how serious her situation is. She knows exactly what will happen to both of the lovers: “ye ar lykly to be slayne, and than shall I be brente! For and ye myght ascape them...I wolde nat doute but that ye wolde rescowe me in what daunger that I ever stood in” (1165.33-36). Lancelot may be slain in the fight, but she will receive no such quick death. She will be brought to the fire, once again made a public spectacle. Her only hope, she knows, is that Lancelot escapes so that he can come back to rescue her. In a touching moment, she prepares for the worst: “I woll neuer lyve longe aftir thy dayes. But and ye be slayne I woll take my dethe as meekly as ever ded marter take hys dethe for Jesu Crystes sake” (1166.25-28). This is a bold comparison, perhaps evidence of her status as “trew” lover. Guinevere resigns herself to her fate, entwined, as always, with Lancelot’s; she can do nothing but prepare to die or be taken.

Lancelot, however, can fight. He slays the first knight, using his armor to kill everyone except Mordred. Once again, he escapes while Guinevere is seized and charged with treason. The exact nature of this accusation, however, is somewhat unclear, leading scholars to posit different bases for the charge. As Batt notes, “Guinevere’s position seems anomalous, both in terms of the Arthurian treason law that condemns her...and in terms of historical legislation for high treason” (171). Malory’s explanation of the charge seems, initially, pretty clear:

So than there was made grete ordynaunce in thys ire, and the quene muste nedis be jouged to the deth. And the law was such in tho dayes that whatsomever they were, of what astate of degree, if they were founden gyilty of treson there shuld be none other remedy but deth, and othir the menour other the takynge wyth the ded shulde be causer of their hasty jougement. And ryght so was hit ordained for quene Gwenyver: bycause

sir Mordred was ascaped sore wounded, and the dethe of thirteyn knyghtes of the Rounde Table, thes previs and experyenses caused kyng Arthure to commaunde the quene to the fyre and there to be brente. (1174.19-29)

But once again Malory has to explain the law of Arthur's court because it sits slightly awkwardly with existing law. The description seems to highlight the equitable nature of treason charges at the time: "whatsomever they were, of what astate of degree," guilty is guilty and punished as such. But the actual basis for the treason charge is slightly obscure; as in the Pentecostal Oath, treason is not defined clearly or explicitly. Thus, in two articles published in the same year, E. Kay Harris and Robert L. Kelly come to different conclusions about what the charges mean. An examination of their arguments reveals the complexity of Malory's presentation of treason.⁷⁵

In her article, Harris argues that despite the text's declaration that it is the death of the knights which leads to the charges, it is really the presumed adultery that is the base of the accusation. Charging Guinevere with the attack on Mordred and the death of the other knights, she maintains, makes no sense since obviously Guinevere did not kill them herself (205). What is more compelling to Harris is the charge of adultery, and she focuses on the way that Malory foregrounds and then ignores the types of proof required to convict someone of treason in Arthur's time. The text explains that "othir the menour other the takynge wyth the ded shulde be causer of their hasty jougement." As she points out, this requirement is a problem for any conviction of Guinevere: "a law which specifies the types of proof necessary to establish the guilt of an alleged traitor is applied

⁷⁵ For Harris, see "Evidence Against Lancelot and Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Treason by Imagination." *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 180-205. For Kelly, see "Hasty jougement" (op. cit).

despite the fact that no such proof has been obtained” (182). There is no proof that Lancelot and Guinevere have engaged in adultery in her room that night; as noted above, Malory refuses to say one way or another. None of the attacking knights see or hear anything which could be construed as proof of an affair going on at the moment they attack. This is not the *flagrante delicto* in which Tristan and Iseut are caught. Lancelot is simply in her room.

In light of this *lack* of “takyng wyth the ded,” Harris argues that it is the concept of “menour,” or mainour, listed first in the proofs, that allows Arthur to find his wife guilty (189-190). As she explains, mainour in the late Middle Ages “means two things: the physical evidence of the crime and the act of the crime itself [...] By extension, mainour applied to other forms of circumstantial evidence” (189). One of these forms of “circumstantial evidence” is, for Harris, the simple existence of the rumors about the affair in the first place. Drawing on the concept, implemented by Henry IV and continued throughout the Middle Ages, of “treason by words” or “treason by imagination,” Harris argues that charges of treason were frequently applied to people against whom there was no physical evidence of a crime: “Henry and his jurists found that words spoken against the king established treason by imagination. Once its interpretive possibilities had been tapped, imagining the death of the king figured frequently in the prosecution of treason throughout the fifteenth century” (183). The crime was in the thoughts of the accused, an idea whose roots are to be found in the first part of the 1352 Statute which made it a crime to “compass” the death of the king. Since treason charges could be—and were—levied without any overt act being necessary, the act of Parliamentary attainder, or

labeling and punishing people as traitors without any formal trial, became common during the fifteenth century, as explained earlier. Lancelot and Guinevere, she implies, are basically attainted of treason by Aggravain and his accusations: “What indicts them is something more subtle [than their own guilty words]: the fact of being accused” (193). This, she suggests, explains Lancelot’s growing concern with their reputations: “Allowed to continue, the noise of slander can become an invisible and invincible accuser who cannot be faced on a battlefield or in a court of law” (202). Problematizing Arthur’s acceptance of this kind of proof, she points to Gawain’s attempts to dissuade Arthur from going through with the punishment, and his suggestions of other ways of reading Lancelot’s presence in Guinevere’s room (1174.31-1175.18). Arthur’s refusal to acknowledge Gawain’s argument reveals both his own pettiness and a larger problem: “Malory challenges what appears to be an impartial application of the law in the Queen’s case by foregrounding the very thing that the applied law of treason obscures or denies: the possibility of alternate readings, alternate interpretations of the evidence” (204).

On the other hand, Robert L. Kelly argues that the charge of treason is, in fact, based on Guinevere’s role in the wounding of Mordred and the death of the other knights. Basing his argument on a study of common law history in England, he posits that the Magna Carta itself “allowed for conviction without a trial of any sort (compurgation, combat, or jury) in cases in which guilt was considered to be self-evident” (114).⁷⁶ Kelly concedes that “From a commonsense point of view, the larger episode of which the

⁷⁶ Like Harris, he points out that “mainour” meant the evidence of the crime (116). However, as he does not believe that the charges are based on adultery, he does not investigate Malory’s use of the term as Harris does.

sentencing of Guinevere is the climax, seems to imply that Guinevere is convicted for treasonous adultery as the outcome of a certain legal logic, if not a formal legal process” (122). But he points out a major flaw in this theory: “adultery was not a crime and could not, therefore, be treasonous” (123). At least, it was not treason for the woman involved: “As the statute clearly indicates, a queen or princess could not be guilty of treason by adultery, but only her male ‘violator’” (124). This is a point Harris misses in her analysis. Women could still be punished, Kelly notes, but it would have been by the church, not by the king (124). Thus, he concludes, the charges are for exactly what Malory says they are for: the wounding and the death of Arthur’s knights. Batt agrees, noting that “the syntax of the account...intimates that, whatever legal provision might exist to punish the consort’s adultery, the queen indeed stands accountable not for adultery, but for killings the legal status of which the terms of her condemnation itself holds in suspension” (175).

But this does not, for Kelly, resolve the ambiguity of the charge. He points out that Guinevere can only be an accessory to the crime (113); it is Lancelot who has actually done the wounding and slaying. Therefore, there can be no charges filed against Guinevere at all until Lancelot has been charged and found guilty first (113). Moreover, Lancelot’s guilt is not at all assured, according to Kelly: Aggravayne oversteps his legal bounds when he denies Lancelot’s request for a battle (127), much like Bérout’s Mark does when he catches Tristan in Iseut’s bed. Kelly argues that “Aggravayne’s status under the law is simply that of a man provoking his own death, as Gawain later alleges” (127). Still, he notes that no matter the complexity of the situation, Arthur exceeds his legal powers as well. Like Harris, Kelly suggests that Arthur takes the law into his own

hands here in denying Guinevere a trial, foregoing the respite typically required in capital case, and judging the case himself (117).⁷⁷

The existence of two plausible theories to explain the charges against Guinevere is perhaps the strongest evidence of just how widely applied the discourse of treason had become by the time Malory was writing. Despite their very different interpretations of the crime at hand, both Harris and Kelly argue that Arthur is not compelled by the law to pursue his punishment of Guinevere. Harris is forced to make the bigger leaps in her argument, but there is no question that both accusations of treason by words and attainder reached new heights during the fifteenth century. Her focus on the importance of reputation and rumor is also sound, given the prominence Malory gives them throughout the *Morte*. Taking Kelly's "commonsense" approach to what the charges seem to really be about, she provides a provocative reading of the charge. However, her approach is hampered by the pesky detail that women would not have been subject to treason charges of adultery under the 1352 Statute. This may simply be a holdover from the earlier source romances, but she does not argue the point. Kelly, who has the stronger argument on the basis of the text, undercuts his own argument, however, by choosing to read this particular charge "in isolation from other textual materials that, given another critical approach, might be seen as relevant—for example, the other treason cases in the *Morte Darthur* decided by judicial combat, and Malory's nontechnical use in other episodes of words such as *traitor* and *treason*" (112). For it is precisely these other moments, definitions, and evocations of treason within the *Morte* that lend the final trial its

⁷⁷ Citing Bracton (2.337), he notes that the king was not to be the judge in cases of treason, as it was inappropriate to have the plaintiff (the king, in cases of treason) serve as the judge" (117-118).

poignancy and power. Kelly may be right in the technical reading of the charge and its dubious legality, but surely Harris is also right that the role of their adultery is paramount in setting the scene and in Arthur's reaction to it. Malory simply makes the charge of treason here too multivalent and too ambiguous for one explanation to hold. It is the same strategy he uses throughout the *Morte*.

Two things seem clear from both readings, however. The first is that Arthur finally starts to lose control over himself and his role as king at this point, as both scholars note. The second, though, goes unmentioned by either: no matter what the basis of the charge is, no matter what the circumstance of treason is, it is a devastating weapon to be used against a woman who cannot fight back in any way. Guinevere is not given the option of an exculpatory oath as Iseut is, or a unilateral ordeal, both of which had fallen out of use by this time. She must rely on the men around her to determine the truth of the accusation, an accusation that is not even clear itself in the first place.⁷⁸ In fact, the very multiplicity of definitions available against Guinevere reflect the problem of treason at large; yet the taking of the queen in particular simultaneously highlights the gendered nature of the charges and the process for dealing with traitors.

Guinevere's rescue here follows a similar pattern to the first two, but the stakes are higher for everyone involved. Lancelot, not held in captivity and thus able to move about, sets out to save Guinevere. There is no formal battle this time, no single opponent to fight. Guinevere has been condemned and is about to be punished. Lancelot is not

⁷⁸ Armstrong, thus, sees Guinevere's predicament as firmly rooted in the gendered codes of Arthurian society and law. She argues that "What Arthur seems to understand at long last is that the masculine project of chivalry is really nothing more than knights acting in accordance with the wishes of ladies. Thus, it is Guinevere who should be held responsible" (191).

alone in feeling that it is his responsibility to rescue her. His own knights tell him that it is his duty: “Insomuch as she shall be brente, hit ys for your sake; and hit ys to suppose, and ye myghte be handeled, ye shulde have the same dethe, otheri ellis a more shamefuller dethe” (1172.14-17). Arthur means business this time, refusing to listen to Gawain’s argument that he is being “hasty” (1174.31-32). In fact, Malory seems anxious to explain or excuse Arthur’s actions; he is simply following the law, Malory insists. Arthur maintains that Guinevere “shall have the law” (1175.23) and, to be fair, that Lancelot “shall have as shamefull a dethe” (1175.24). To go along with the deadly serious nature of the charges, this is the most explicit of the three attempted burnings. Guinevere is

lad further without Carlyle, and anone she was despoiled into her smoke. And than her gostely fadir was brought to her to be shriven of her myssededis.⁷⁹ Than was there wepyng and waylynge and wrynging of hondis of many lordys and ladyes; but there were but feaw in comparison that wolde beare any armoure for to strengthe the dethe of the quene. (1177.8-14)

This recalls the similar scene of Iseut being brought to the fire, with “wepyng and waylynge and wrynging of hondis.” Her public shame, in fact, seems key here. For the first two trials, Malory does not give a complete description of her, but now he states that she is “despoiled into her smoke.” When Lancelot rides in and rescues her, the first thing he does is to “caste a kurdyll and a gown uppon her, and then he made her to be setter behynde hym and prayed her to be of good chere” (1178.7-10). Her shame, thus, secured by her husband’s decree, is the first thing her lover addresses. He then takes her away from the court that has seen her brought to the fire three times. As Armstrong notes, “The

⁷⁹ Kaufman points out that this mention of “her gostely fadir” paves the way for her future conversion (85).

particular case of Lancelot and Guenevere highlights the untenable nature of a system whereby ‘truth’ is determined in combat and knightly devotion to one’s lady is valued so highly” (176). Arthur must, to save his own honor, if not by legal custom, necessarily, burn his queen; Lancelot must, to save his own knightly honor, if not to assuage his guilt, rescue her. Guinevere, however, is not in a position to do anything but to bear her public shame and wait to see who wins.

In fact, Guinevere almost disappears from the text at this point. Tellingly, Arthur becomes more focused on the strife between his men than between him and his wife. The discourse of treason remains, as I have noted in my discussion of Lancelot, but it shifts focus. Lancelot’s accidental slaying of Gaherys and Gareth during his rescue of Guinevere will, as Arthur knows, “cause the grettist mortall warre that ever was” (1183.27-28). As Ellis reminds us, it is with Balin’s sword that Lancelot kills one of his best friends, Gareth (70). This is just one of the ways in which the early betrayals of the book come back to haunt it at the end. And it is this action, this fracture of the bonds between knights, this loss of men, and not his queen, safely tucked up in Lancelot’s Joyous Garde, that is Arthur’s primary concern for the remainder of the *Morte*. Arthur puts it plainly: “And much more I am sorryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never by togydirs in no company” (1184.1-5). When he comes to Joyous Garde to call Lancelot out, Arthur tells him “I am thy mortall foo and ever woll to my deth-day; for thou haste slayne my good knyghtes and full noble men of my blood, that shall I never recover agayne. Also thou haste layne be my quene and holdyn her many

winters, and sytthen, lyke a traytoure, taken her away fro me by fors” (1187.29-34). The order in which he lists his grievances is striking: he privileges the death of the knights over the sexual betrayal of the queen. Yet it is in connection with Guinevere that Arthur names him a “traytoure.” As Edwards points out, adultery “is the scene of open rivalry between Arthur and Lancelot for only a few pages before the king is again reconciled with the queen, and conflict displaced onto the kinship vendetta of Gawain” (48). Arthur’s desire for reconciliation with Lancelot, for a return to the secure masculine community he had idealized initially, is so strong that, Malory informs us, “Arthure wolde have takyn hys quene agayne and to have bene accorded with sir Launcelot, but sir Gawayne wolde nat suffir hym by no maner of meane” (1190.17-20). Although the pope’s intervention brings Guinevere back to Arthur’s side, the battle against Lancelot continues under Gawain’s insistence.

Guinevere thus resurfaces only to be drawn into a treasonous plot again, but this time it is one in which Lancelot takes no part, not even to rescue her. The relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot seems to be over for good, and her active role in the poem fades while the focus shifts to the battle between Lancelot and Arthur, who is urged by Gawain to continue the fight. Taking advantage of all the distraction caused by the infighting, Mordred draws up false letters proclaiming Arthur’s death and gets himself selected as king (1227.1-6).⁸⁰ This is clear treason, the clearest of the book, with Mordred “compassyng” the death of the king and working to secure the throne for himself.

⁸⁰ Cherewatuk asks the reasonable question “why does Mordred have to usurp the throne; why can’t he simply inherit it?” (109). She answers: “Unlike medieval Spain and Portugal, where bastards could succeed, Engalnd allowed no illegitimate kings after William the Conquerer” (118). The illicit sexual mores once again contribute to the downfall of the kingdom.

Moreover, he has decided to marry Guinevere; Malory makes clear that the incestuous nature of such a marriage, reminding us that she “was hys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff” (1227.10).⁸¹ Armstrong notes that “Mordred is a traitor in every sense of the word: he has committed treason in the political sense in endeavoring to usurp the throne, but of more significance, his attempt to claim both the throne and Guenevere is a violation of the blood-bond, the primary organizing principle of the chivalric social order” (196). Against this threat, Guinevere shows a similar capacity for self-preservation here as she did in her encounter with Mellyagaunt, outsmarting Mordred and locking herself in the Tower of London (1227.15-21). More significantly, she refrains from asking Lancelot for his help. It is Gawain, dying, and repentant for his incessant accusations against Lancelot, who sends him word of Mordred’s actions (1231.8-1232.10). Even more tellingly, Lancelot chooses to rescue not Guinevere, but Arthur. The final treasons of the book, though perhaps exacerbated by the tumult of their affair, and the ensuing trials, are those between men.

It is, thus, not just the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, but the conflicting loyalties and the push and pull of kin relations that bring Arthur’s kingdom to its final collapse. The discourse of treason retains its power; it is just shifted from one corner to another. Gawain, who has been accusing Lancelot of treason repeatedly, now shifts his focus to Mordred, naming him a “false traytour” (1231.28; 1232.3). Arthur and Mordred ultimately make a deal, that Mordred will rule parts of England during Arthur’s life and

⁸¹ Cherevatuk points out that the secret of Mordred’s paternity “lies just below the surface. It is a relationship about which everyone knows but no one speaks, making it oddly parallel to Launcelot and Guenevere’s affair” (124).

all of England after Arthur really has died (1234.35-1235.1-2). But the deal falls apart because neither side can trust the other fully (1235.20-27). The atmosphere of treason which has always haunted the kingdom finally brings it down. In the end, the battle comes down to a fight between a father and his son, with Arthur repeatedly calling Mordred a “traytoure” (1236.20; 1236.26; 1237.11).⁸² The gory mess at the end, a field strewn with the bodies of dead knights, is an ugly metaphor for the collapse of the kingdom (1238.17-21). Just as he can only be hurt by his own sword, he can only be killed by his own son.⁸³ Destruction comes from within, from betrayal and treason. After one of the few survivors, Bedevere, has finally disposed of Excalibur in the manner a dying Arthur has requested,⁸⁴ Arthur says simply that “in me ys no truste for to truste in” (1240.32). Treason and treachery have won, displacing even the hope of trusting in anyone.

Yet it is Guinevere who seems to put the cycle of treason to rest more thoroughly than anyone else. As the men fight themselves to the death, and to the destruction of their idyllic kingdom, Guinevere turns away from earthly men and towards a higher power. She becomes a nun, “and grete penaunce she toke uppon her, as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe. And never creature coude make her myry, but ever she lyved in fastyng, prayers, and almes-dedis, that all maner of people mervayeld how virtuously she was

⁸² As Armstrong suggests, “Arthur is apparently the author of his own undoing, whether it be the sin of incest or adultery that ultimately brings about the destruction of his realm” (51).

⁸³ The phallic imagery is clear here.

⁸⁴ By not following Arthur’s orders the first two times, Bedevere earns himself the charge of “traytour” (1239.27).

changed” (1243.6-10). Armstrong points out that “Guenevere’s entrance into the nunnery seems to have its motivation in an honest desire to atone for what she perceives to be her past sinfulness” (200).⁸⁵ She, unlike Lancelot, takes responsibility for her actions, telling her fellow religious that “Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warred be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobleste knyghtes of the worlde; for thorowoure love that we have loved togydire ys my moste noble lorde slayne” (1252.8-11). When Lancelot finds her in the abbey, and asks for a goodbye kiss, she is the one to say no: “that shal I never do, but absteyne you from suche werkes” (1253.27-28). Her last words are “I beseche Almyghte God that I may never have power to see syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen!” (1255.36-37).⁸⁶ This is a wonderfully telling, yet ambiguous, statement. On the one hand, she asks not to see Lancelot, which seems like self-control. On the other hand, she asks not even to be able to see him; she wants the decision taken out of her hands. Moreover, although she talks about her “worldly eyen,” she makes no claim about what she hopes to see with her heavenly eyes. For she is, she is sure, going to heaven:

‘And therefore, sir Launcelot, I require the and beseche the hartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou never se me no more in the visayge. And I commaunde the, on Goddis behalf, that thou turne agayne, and kepe well they realme frome warre and wrake, for as well as I have loved the heretofore, myne harte woll nat serve now to se the: for thorow the and my ys the floure of kyngis and knyghtes destroyed. And therefore go thou to thy realme, and there take ye a wyff, an lyff with hir in joy and

⁸⁵ Edwards makes the same point: “Guinevere in particular takes responsibility for her actions” (54); Riddy agrees, saying that it is true “penitence” that marks the difference between Guinevere and Lancelot’s confessions (*Malory* 157). Benson, however, disagrees, arguing that her swooning reaction to Lancelot indicates that she has not really changed (236).

⁸⁶ Wallace, however, makes the point that “Praying *not* to see someone entails, inevitable, imagining of them” (“Malory 239).

blys. And I pray the hartely to pray for me to the Everlastyng Lorde that I may amende my mysselyvyng.' (1252.16-29).

She asks him, in the name of their former love, to leave, to go back to his country and find someone to replace her. The old Guinevere is no longer available, having truly decided to devote herself to repenting for the role she now acknowledges she played in not just the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, but in his death. She is humble, accepting the fact that she still needs the prayers of others. Once she has died, a vision tells Lancelot to "burye hir by her husband, the noble kyng Arthur" (1255.19-20). In death, she joins her husband more firmly than she did in life. She has made her ultimate choice.

Unlike Lancelot, Guinevere cannot defend herself from the rumors of their affair, nor can she hide from her own guilt. She has been paraded in public three times, coming dangerously close to paying both for her crimes and for the crimes of other. As a woman, she is not allowed to fight to prove her version of the truth; her physicality is displayed bound, ready to be shamed. She is as caught up as any male character in the snare of treasonous discourse, and she is perhaps more guilty than most, but she never has the opportunity to participate in her own defense to the same degree that the men can. She cannot fight within the system, as Lancelot does. Thus, she is forced to examine her life and the choices she has made, and that examination, and genuine remorse and repentance, ultimately saves her and takes her out of the treacherous earthly world.

Conclusions

As Malory's long narrative makes clear, Lancelot and Guinevere's betrayal is not the only cause of the fall of the Round Table. The perceived betrayals and genuine treasons of many play major roles from the very start of the *Morte*. It is treason itself

which brings down Camelot, spreading itself from villain to victim and back again. As Ellis points out in her study of the early “Balin” episode, “treachery ultimately defines the betrayed as well as the traitors: it has become the only sure link in a deteriorating chain of social relationships” (72). From the moment of Arthur’s very conception, political, familial, and romantic betrayal work together to connect the main characters in a web of treason that stretches throughout the whole culture. Arthur’s early attempt to prevent this very thing, his injunction to all of his knights to avoid treason in the Pentecostal Oath, is doomed to fail for a variety of reasons. The lack of any specific definition of treason is perhaps the most obvious, but on the other hand, what would it mean to try to create a definition broad enough to cover the wide scope of treacherous behaviors seen in the text? The fifteenth century itself, and indeed the Middle Ages, struggled with just such a task. Legal treason was constantly being defined, redefined, and expanded; people were routinely being accused and convicted, “attainted,” of treason without any proof, and sometimes without any trial. This is to say nothing of the way that terms like “treason,” “traitor,” and “betrayal” were commonly used to designate disloyal behavior that had nothing to do with the legal crimes of imagining the death of the king or counterfeiting money.

Adding to this already complex system of legal and cultural vagueness and anxiety is the issue of the rigidly held gendered codes and behaviors of the Arthurian world. Women and treachery seem linked to each other from the start, going all the way back to the first accusation of treason against Arthur’s mother Igrayne for a perceived deception that she has no possible way of controlling. Women in Malory seem to have

easier access to magic, a weapon that often aids the treachery they often seem to have planned.⁸⁷ However, as easily as Malory sets up such a system, he problematizes it by showing that the men in the text, even the “good” men, are just as capable and prone to betrayal as the women. Knights lie, attack without warning, and even murder other knights, whether it is someone below them, as when Mark kills Tristram, or above them, as when Mordred fatally wounds Arthur. The best of all men, the “floure of knyghthode,” Lancelot, never plots against his king, and consistently refuses to fight against him. Yet this same man carries on an affair with the king’s wife. For every accusation of treason that is false, whether against a man or a woman, there is one that is true. Guinevere, the “trew” lady of the text, is truer for most of it to her adulterous lover than to her lawful husband. Truth itself comes under question; Lancelot lies blithely throughout the text about the affair, and Guinevere is saved from burning whether the charges against her are true or false.

It is, in fact, in the accusations against both Lancelot and Guinevere that Malory shows just how entwined the idea of gender is with the discourse of treason. As the best knight in the land, the shining example of chivalry and masculinity, Lancelot cannot allow himself to be called a traitor without destroying the accuser. He cannot allow those who betray him to go unpunished, either; he is prevented only when those who deceive him are women, such as Elaine of Corbin. As a man, Lancelot can roam about the kingdom, fighting accusations of treachery with both his words and his body. As a man, Lancelot can engage in legal trial by battles as often as he needs to, all the while

⁸⁷ The obvious exception here is Merlin; but it must be noted that he is ultimately removed by the very woman to whom he has entrusted his own magical secrets, Nynyve.

reassuring himself that he is upholding his masculinity by defending his lady and winning himself more honor. Yet Guinevere has no such recourse to words or physicality to defend herself from the charges she faces. She is caught three times within the domestic sphere of the castle—the dining room once, and her own chambers twice—and accused of several different kinds of treason: two, according to Harris, and three, according to Kelly. There is an always expanding nexus of treason charges available against Guinevere, but there is only ever one way of disputing the charges, and that is to rely on a man to fight for her. She cannot use her body to deflect the rumors swirling around her, and she ultimately comes to realize the extent of her own guilt and repent accordingly. This may, perhaps, seem like a privilege, but it comes at a very high price.

Guinevere, thus, makes a good ending for my discussion of treason and gender in both Malory and the literature of the Middle Ages as well. My point has not, despite the broad span of time, place, and genre of the works discussed, been to make a teleological argument about treason. If anything, this examination of the discourse of treason has shown that it has always been a multivalent term. Just as each age negotiates existing cultural concepts and creates new applications of legal treason, each text constructs its own versions of treason, legal, romantic, or both. While it retains its status as the worst of all crimes, how and why it maintains that status varies constantly, as do the laws and cultural codes that help construct its definitions. The increasingly narrow legal focus on treason as a crime against the king is countered by the explosion of legally-accepted methods of committing it. Thoughts, words, and suspicion itself become proof of guilt.

The texts do not, thus, necessarily reflect the exact legal processes of the time of their creation, but the general concerns of the cultural conceptions of betrayal, along with anxieties about how to root it out. Ganelon's guilt, for example, apparent to the reader, is settled in the poem only by the *judicium dei*, the trial by battle, that proves Charlemagne's charges true, and leads to Ganelon's brutal death as a traitor. Yet in Malory, even the trial by battle cannot really settle legal matters, made dubious by the guilty but invincible Lancelot's ability to rescue Guinevere every single time. As I have argued in my discussion of *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*, there are even major differences in the presentation of treason within two works by the same author writing during a fairly short period of time.

The study of treason becomes even more complicated by examining the role of gender in the charges and prosecution of treason. Misogynist fears of women's innate ability, almost compulsion, to deceive clearly play a role in the fates of Iseut, Criseyde, and Guinevere. Yet at the same time, it is the most deceptive woman under consideration here, Iseut, who has the greatest appreciation of the power of truth, and it is the most careful and least guilty woman, Criseyde, who ends up with the worst condemnation. With their inferior legal status, the women accused of treason in these texts are always hyperaware of the dangers they are in, dangers which—with the noted exception of Lancelot—the men in their lives seem generally unconcerned. Tristran is sure he will save Iseut, and escapes the trip to the stake without taking her with him; Troilus never considers the possibility that Crisedye could be attacked or raped; and Aeneas, Jason, Theseus, and Demophon could not care less what happens to the women they have ruined

and abandoned. Even Lancelot, who does try to protect Guinevere at every turn, rests fairly secure in the knowledge that he will be able to save her. Few of the men stop to consider that the possible negative consequences for the women are usually far more pressing; this is a concern which the women themselves cannot ignore.

Ultimately, whether the betrayal involved is political or romantic, a study of treason in the Middle Ages reveals the anxiety about a crime that owes its existence to the human capacity to shift loyalties and priorities, to conceal thoughts and emotions, and to deceive. Such anxieties naturally trigger both broader political concerns and more personal worries. Laws cannot protect against it, and in fact can be used in its service, as the historical examples of Richard II's reign and the turmoil of the Wars of the Roses, and the literary examples of Mark in Béroul's *Tristan* and Arthur in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, prove. Cultural customs cannot always define it to the satisfaction of each member of the society, as all of the texts show. In fact, the texts themselves cannot necessarily maintain static presentations of it. The ideas and beliefs that comprise the definition, execution, and discourse of treason are constantly shifting, constantly revealing the larger cultural values and changes that accompany them. The literature of the Middle Ages shows an incredible variety in depictions of treason, but one thing is always clear. Treason wounds in any sphere—Charlemagne is no less devastated than Dido or Ariadne; he simply has more power to do something about it. Had Canacee's magical, treason-detecting mirror really been available in the Middle Ages, it would have been an incredibly powerful tool, able to fight against what remained the ultimate crime.

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