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Author(s)	Tajiri, Masaji
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“So well y schall the saue”
— A Study of the ME Tail-Rhyme ‘Breton Lays’*

Masaji TAJIRI

1.

I have discussed elsewhere a body of Middle English romances labelled as “Breton lays”, and argued that the lays composed in octosyllabic couplets, and the ones in tail-rhyme stanzas normally rhyming aabccbddbeeb, belong to two different traditions in ME literature.⁽¹⁾ While the couplet lays, i.e., *Sir Landevale* (early 14th century, South), *Lay le Freine* (early 14th century, Southwest/Westminster-Middlesex), *Sir Orfeo* (early 14th century, Southwest/Westminster-Middlesex), *Sir Degaré* (before 1325, Southwest Midland) are by and large a genuine type of Breton lay reminiscent of Celtic tradition, the tail-rhyme lays, i.e., *Sir Launfal* by Thomas Chestre (late 14th century, Southeast), *Emaré* (c.1400, Northeast), *The Earl of Toulouse* (c.1400, Northeast Midland), *Sir Gowther* (c.1400, Northeast Midland) are lays in name only, and, like other tail-rhyme romances, thematically more Germanic than Celtic.⁽²⁾ Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales* is also treated as a Breton lay, but owes its main source to Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* and should be distanced from either of the two groups. But the poet obviously endeavoured to infuse a Breton atmosphere into the tale by describing with vividness a rocky seacoast in Brittany, which is expertise apparently lacking in the makers of the tail-rhyme lays.

It was A. M. Trownce who first made an in-depth analysis of dozens of tail-rhyme romances and passed a generally favourable judgement on them: "They constitute one of the three broad streams of poetical narrative literature of the fourteenth century in England, the other two being what we may designate as the 'French School' of Chaucer and Gower, and the 'West Midland' of the 'Gawayne' poems and *Piers Plowman*." He then identifies one of the most striking traits of the poems as their "Germanicness", saying that poetry in tail-rhyme stanzas "has more authentic echoes of the Germanic epic feeling than any other poetry of the fourteenth century."⁽³⁾ Trownce has recently been criticised for his inaccurate identification of the dialects and provenance of some of the tail-rhyme romances.⁽⁴⁾ He perhaps overestimates the significance of this body of poems, too, in which one can find no masterpieces to rival Chaucer or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But his descriptions of the romances as descendants of Germanic epic are not far wide of the mark. I have found and examined some possible residues of the theme known as "The Hero on the Beach" in six tail-rhyme romances dealing with the Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda legends. It is known that the theme is recurrent in Germanic, notably Old English, poems.⁽⁵⁾

A. J. Bliss, on the other hand, emphasises the popular nature of tail-rhyme romances: "Whereas the alliterative romances are unmistakably aristocratic in character,...the tail-rhyme romances are as clearly more popular: they are the work of travelling minstrels, intended for a mixed audience." A general slowness, repetitiveness, and discursiveness, which he lists as the traits of the romances, are what the minstrel resorted to so that he could hold up the progress of his story recited to the mostly unlearned populace "often in the disturbed

atmosphere of, perhaps, a village inn."⁽⁶⁾

In reading the tail-rhyme lays, I am struck, more than anything else, by two characteristics: one is the hero/heroine's sufferings—mostly due to false accusation—at the hands of wicked characters, which are followed by vindication and the punishment of the offenders, and the other is the heroine, who plays a significant role in the development of the story by giving succour to the trouble-stricken hero, or by restoring the lost order at the end. In the following, I will examine these two features, which are basically absent in the couplet lays, hence, along with the other differences discussed in my earlier paper, making the two groups of the ME Breton lays look conspicuously heterogeneous.

2.

2. 1.

Susan Wittig singles out relative leniency towards sinful characters as a characteristic of ME romances: "In comparison to the Icelandic sagas and other Germanic tales, the Middle English romances seem to be remarkably careless in their handling of villains.... Punishment or revenge, while it occasionally occurs, is not an important structural component. These tales...are much more concerned with social and personal restitution than with personal retribution, and the structural differences between the saga and the romance can be seen at just this point."⁽⁷⁾ Perhaps she is basically right, but the theme of retribution, together with restitution, seems a little more emphatic in tail-rhyme romances than in the other types of romance. John Bernard Beston argues that the themes of the tail-rhyme lays, "like those of the tail-rhyme poems generally, are concerned with vindication after false

accusation, with the expiation of transgression, and with the punishment of falseness."⁽⁸⁾

We shall now see how the heroes, heroines and other characters in the tail-rhyme lays are plunged into the abyss of despair by villains and how order is restored with vindication and/or retribution.

2. 2.

Launfal is a romance a certain Thomas Chestre composed, presumably making use of *Landeuale*, *Graelent*—an anonymous *lai breton*—and a story now lost.⁽⁹⁾ Sir Launfal, an Arthurian knight, receives the attention of Queen Guinevere. Rejected, the ireful Queen then blames the knight in Arthur's presence for "making advances to her": "I spak to Launfal yn my game, / And he besofte me of schame— / My lemman fore to be! / And of a lemman hys yelp he made, / Pat pe lodlokest mayde pat sche hadde / Myȝt be a quene aboue me.' / Kyng Artour was well wrop, / And be God he swor hys op / Pat Launfal schuld be sclawe. / He wente aftyr doȝty knyȝtes / to brynge Launfal anoon ryȝtes / To be hongep and todrawe." (ll.715–26)⁽¹⁰⁾

Launfal is ordered to bring to the court his beloved—Dame Tryamour, a fairy lady—whose ugliest maid is, as he boasts, more beautiful than Guinevere. Otherwise he should be executed. Tryamour, however, does not appear immediately, because the knight has not kept their love secret. But finally she appears: "Kyng Artoure seyde, withouten ope, / 'Ech man may yse pat ys sope, / Bryȝtere pat ye [Tryamour] be.' / With pat, Dame Tryamour to pe Quene gep, / And blew on here swych a brep / Pat neuer eft myȝt sche se." (ll.1003–08) Guinevere is blinded, because she has made a casual oath, "ȝyf he bryngeþ a fayrere pynge, / Put out my eeyn gray!" (ll.808–10) Bliss

describes this scene as “repugnant to decent feeling.”¹⁰⁰ No matter how distasteful the scene may be to modern minds, however, I imagine that Chestre’s treatment of the wayward Guinevere certainly lived up to the expectations of the medieval Midland audience.

While *Launfal* is a story with a tinge of folklore centring on the hero’s tribulations and retribution for his offender, the couplet *Landevale*, closer to Marie’s *Lanval*, puts less emphasis on crime and punishment. Blinding is absent in the latter, where Guinevere is simply put to shame, and that is all. Dieter Mehl points out that in *Launfal* “the Queen is introduced at a very early point in the story and from the start there is mutual dislike between her and Launfal,” though she later attempts to seduce the knight who has been enriched and endowed with prowess by Tryamour.¹⁰²

In one of my previous papers, I compared the tail-rhyme Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda romances and the Japanese traditional narratives known as *sekkyo*, and discussed some common features found therein. Like the tail-rhyme lays, *sekkyo*, which were popular in the medieval and early modern ages, mostly tell of hardships suffered by wandering nobles and the punishment of villains at the end, though the Japanese tales are far more pitiful and sympathetic in their descriptions of the trouble-stricken heroes and heroines, and even less lenient towards sinful people.¹⁰³

In one of the *sekkyo* entitled *Sansho-dayu*, the malicious Sansho-dayu who tormented the hero Tsushio-maru and tortured to death his elder sister Anjyu is executed in an extremely cruel fashion by order of Tsushio-maru, who is now a powerful viceroy: Tsushio orders one of Sansho-dayu’s sons, who is as evil as his father, to saw off the old man’s head. It was the novelist Ugai Mori (1862–1922) who adapted

this story for modern readers. He, however, removed the sawing-off scene from his adaptation, and moreover, allowed the house of Sansho-dayu to prosper further. No doubt, a merciless punishment like beheading was "repugnant to decent feeling" for the modern intellectual and his readers. Takeshi Umehara, a philosopher, criticises Ougai's revision, but adds that his animadversions are addressed to "modernity" rather than to the author alone.⁶⁰ Though both *Landevale* and *Launfal* belong to medieval times and *Landevale* is in fact slightly earlier, I find an intriguing parallel between the treatments of Guinevere and Sansho-dayu, taking into account the fact that *Landevale* was admittedly intended for a more refined and aristocratic audience than that of *Launfal*.

2. 3.

In *Emaré*, the heroine Emaré is set adrift in a rudderless boat twice: first by her father, the Emperor, who makes a proposal to his own daughter and is rejected, secondly, with her little son, by her wicked mother-in-law. The following is her second exile: "Then was per sorow and myche woo/When pe lady to shype shulde go;/They wepte and wronge her hondus./The lady, pat was meke and mylde,/In her arme she bar her chylde,/And toke leue of pe londe./When she wente ynto pe see/In pat robe of ryche ble,/Men sowened on pe sonde./Sore pey wepte and sayde, 'Alas!/Certys, pys ys a wykked kase!/Wo worth dedes wronge!'/The lady and pe lytyll chylde/Fleted forth on pe watur wylde,/Wyth full harde happes./Her surkote, pat was large and wyde,/Therwyth her vysage she gan hyde/Wyth pe hynpur lappes;/She was aferde of pe see,/And layde her gruf vponn a tre,/The chylde to her pappes./The

wawes, þat were grete and strong,/On þe bote faste þey
ponge,/Wyth mony vnsemely rappes." (ll.637-60) Thus she and her
boy baby drift about, tormented by violent weather and hunger.

When the king of Galicia, Emaré's husband, learns of his mother's
treachery, he decides that she be burnt at the stake: "'Alas!' þen
sayde þe Kynge,/“Wheþur my modur were so vnhende/To make þys
treson?/By my krowne, she shall be brent,/Wythowten any opur
iugement;/That thenketh me best reson!'/Grete lordes toke hem
betwene/That þey wolde exyle þe Qwene/And berefte here hyr
renowne./Thus þey exiled þe false Qwene/And byrafte here hyr
lyflope clene,/Castell, towre, and towne." (ll.793-804)

It is interesting to note that the Queen Mother is not burnt after
all, but just exiled in accordance with the great lords' arrangements.
Cheryl Gene Colopy explains this commutation: "The appropriateness
of the action of the advisors—who represent one aspect of the young
king's will—seems clear. The horror of matricide must be averted.
Fairy tales allow the execution of step-mothers, witches and other
embodiments of the 'bad' mother, but a real mother cannot be
dismissed so easily."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the heroine's incestuous father never
receives any form of punishment, but simply goes on a pilgrimage to
Rome for penance. In the contemporary analogues of our romance,
i.e., Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* and John Gower's "The Tale of
Constance" in *Confessio Amantis*, however, the Queen Mother is
executed by her own son, as she is in Nicholas Trivet's *Chronique
Anglo-Normande*, to which the two poets are believed to have turned
for the source of their stories. This difference in the treatment of the
Queen is puzzling, but possibly the didactic romancer of *Emaré* found
it appropriate to avoid thoroughly downgrading such noble personages

as the Emperor and the Queen Mother. We should also recall Wittig's remarks quoted in 2.1.

2. 4.

Toulouse is what may be called "an historical lay", which "builds on the relations of Bernard I, Count of Barcelona and Toulouse, and Empress Judith, second wife of Louis le debonnaire; in 831 the Empress was charged with adultery, but acquitted; later Bernard offered to meet in combat anyone still questioning his honor."¹⁰⁰ As Mehl puts it, the romance is, in spite of the misleading title, a story of a falsely accused lady, which is manifested by the romancer himself at the beginning: "Leue lordys, y schall you telle/Of a tale, some tyme befelle/Farre yn vnkowthe lede:/How a lady had grete myschefe, /And how sche couyrd of hur grefe;/Y pray yow take hede!" (11.7—12)¹⁰¹

Empress Beulybon, wife of Emperor Diocletian of Almayne, is courted by two knights in charge of her protection during the Emperor's absence. Rejected, the men falsely accuse her of infidelity by using a dirty trick: "The lady woke and was afryght,/Whan sche sawe the grete lyght/Before hur beddys syde./Sche seyde, 'Benedycyté! /Syr, what men be yee?'/And wonder lowde sche cryedd./Hur enemyes mysansweryd pore/'We are here, thou false hore:/Thy dedys we haue aspyedd!/Thou haste betrayed my lorde;/Thou schalt haue wonduryng in pys worde:/Thy loos schall sprynge wyde!'/The lady seyde, 'Be Seynte lohn,/Hore was y neuyr none,/Nor neuyr thoght to bee.'/Thou lystest,' pey seyde, 'py loue ys lorne'—/The corse pey leyde hur beforne—/Lo, here ys thy lemman free!/Thus we haue for pe hym hytt;/Py horedam schall be wele quytte:/Fro vs schalt thou

not flee! / They bonde þe lady wondyr faste / And in a depe preson hur caste: / Grete dele hyt was to see!" (ll.781-804) Here, the Empress, abused as a whore, receives cruel treatment, the descriptions of which bear an almost sadistic tone.

Towards the end of the romance, however, the Empress is acquitted of adultery with succour brought by Sir Bernard, Earl of Toulouse, who has secretly fallen in love with her and subdues her accusers in a trial by combat. The evildoers are burnt at the stake: "Before the Emperoure they wente / And there he made hym, verrament, / To telle for the noonys. / He seyde, 'We thoght hur to spyll, / For sche wolde not do oure wylle, / That worthy ys in wonnys.' / The Erle answeyrd hym then, / 'Therefore, traytours, ye schall brenne / Yn thys fyre, bothe at onys!' / The Erle anon them hente, / And in the fyre he þem brente, / Flesche, felle, and boonys," (ll.1129-40) This is another instance of poetic justice done, which must have appealed to the medieval audience.

2. 5.

Gowther is a version of the popular "Robert the Devil" legends. This didactic tale is quite unlike the three romances we have seen so far; it is the hero himself who persecutes the innocent. Sir Gowther, begot by a devil, kills his wet nurses and even does harm to his mother. Grown up, he terrorises innocent people, particularly the religious: "Now is he duke of greyt renown / And men of holy kyrke dynggus down, / Wher he myght hom mete. / Masse ne matens wold he non here / Nor no prechyng of no frere, / That dar I heyly hette. / [Erly and] late, lowde and stylle, / He wold wyrke is fadur wyll / Wher he stod or sete. / Hontyng lufde he aldurbest, / Parke,

wodd and wylde forest,/Bothe be weyus and strete./He went to
 honte apou a day;/He see a nonry be tho way/And thedur con he
 ryde./The pryorys and hur covent/With presescion ageyn hym
 went/Full hastely that tyde./Thei wer full ferd of his body,/For he
 and is men bothe leyn hom by:/Tho sothe why schuld Y hyde?/And
 sythyn he spard hom in hor kyrke/And brend hom up—thus con he
 werke;/Then went his name full wyde./All that ever on Cryst con
 lefe,/Yong and old, he con hom greve/In all that he myght
 doo./Meydyns' maryage wolde he spyll/And take wyffus ageyn hor
 wyll,/And sley hor husbondus too./And make frerus to leype at
 kraggus/And persons forto heng on knaggus,/And odor prestys
 sloo./To bren armettys was is dyssyre:/A powre wedow to seyt on
 fyre,/And werke hom mykyll woo.(ll.166–201)¹⁰⁰ Here is the depiction
 of Gowther persecuting clerics and pious laymen in every conceivable
 way, which must have been appalling and abhorrent to the equally
 religious audience in the Midlands.

Eventually, however, the hero learns of his identity, and goes to
 Rome to confess his sins to the Pope, who orders him to eat only
 what he can snatch from dogs and to follow the ascetic practice of
 silence until he receives a sign of pardon from heaven: “‘Wherser thou
 travellys be northe or soth,/Thou eyt no meyt bot that thou revus of
 howndus mothe,/Cum thy body within;/Ne no worde speke for evyll
 ne gud,/Or thou reydé tokyn have fro God/That forgyfyn is thi
 syn.’” (ll.292–97) He then abases himself into beggardom, and serves
 as a fool at the court of Almayne. In the light of his past evildoing,
 this penance may strike us as relatively lenient. But his sincere
 commitment to atonement is impressive and even cathartic. And, as
 Andrea Hopkins suggests, “the justification of Gowther’s sins lies not

in the length of penance endured but in the intensity of grief and repentance felt by him."¹⁰⁸ Susan Jane Hilligoss describes Gowther as a character who plays alone all the roles prerequisite to the story of the calumniated wife: an evil steward or mother-in-law, a misguided but later contrite husband or father, and an innocent, persecuted wife plus offspring.¹⁰⁹ In any event, he, as a hero, is duly destined and expected to be different from any of the villains in the other tail-rhyme lays.

2. 6.

We have seen that the concatenation of persecution (false accusation)-vindication-punishment is, though with occasional anomalies, a central theme in the tail-rhyme lays. Though they have traditionally been classified as Breton lays, they obviously show closer affinities to the other tail-rhyme romances, notably, the Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda legends where, for example, Florence in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* suffers tribulations at the hands of wicked men, but is fully restored to noble status, and the offenders pay for their evildoing in the concluding part. The tail-rhyme lays tend to be, by and large, more Germanic than Breton or Celtic.

In *Emaré* and *Toulouse*, both telling of persecuted heroines, one can find some commentary by the poets themselves or certain characters, which emphasises the pitiful conditions the heroines are in, or condemns the villains—in *Emaré*: "And þat was gret pyté"(1.276); "Woo worth wederus yll!" (1.336); "Wo worth dedes wronge!" (1.648); "Wo worth chawnses ylle! (1.684); in *Toulouse*: "There euell mote he [a treacherous knight who attempts to ruin Bernard] the!" (1.417); "There euyll must they [the two knights who falsely accuse the Empress, also in the following] the!"(1.600); "The deuell mote them

spede!"(1.696); There foule muste them falle!" (1.708); "Thes false men (ay worthe pem woo!)" (1.760); "Grete dele hyt was to see!" (1.804). What is interesting, in connection with our discussion in 2.3, is that in *Emaré* bad weather is cursed instead of the Father Emperor, and evil deeds and misfortune, rather than the Queen Mother, are condemned. Nine of the ten sentences quoted above appear in tail lines which are often contextually empty tags. But the lines, it seems to me, are something more than rhyme-tags. These interjections are a kind of interlude which certainly aroused strong emotions and heartfelt sympathies among the audience.⁶⁹ It is to be noted that these phrases, characteristic of tail-rhyme romances, rarely appear in the couplet lays.

2. 7.

The couplet lays *Freine*, *Degaré*, *Orfeo* and Chaucer's *Franklin* are considerably different from the tail-rhyme lays, even if they are the stories depicting an aspect of the hero/heroine's agonies. (I have already made a comparison between *Launfal* and *Landevale* in 2.2.)

Both *Freine* and *Degaré* are foundlings, but they are, of course, unaware of the fact until they are told so. They undergo considerable hardship, but are not nearly so severely agonised by the malicious as the tail-rhyme personae are.⁷⁰ *Orfeo* is, indeed, a trouble-stricken hero. The reader does pity him—perhaps more than the tail-rhyme heroes like *Launfal*.⁷¹ But it is not human beings but a fairy king and his knights that kidnap *Heurodis*, the hero's wife. After *Orfeo*'s self-imposed exile, the story comes to a happy ending without any form of retribution. *Dorigen* in *Franklin* puts herself in a difficult situation by making a rash promise.

In none of these non-tail-rhyme lays do real villains appear. The contrite mother of Freine, the fairy knight who swoons on noticing that he has been combatting with his own son Degaré, the fairy king easily taken in by Orfeo, Aurelius, who quits Dorigen of "every serement and every bond"—none of them deserve the poets' curses as the evildoers in the tail-rhyme lays do.

3.

3. 1.

Women in medieval literature, including romances, are a topic much discussed today. In her essay on women in romance, Elizabeth Archibald argues that female figures like Emaré more or less reflect reality in the Middle Ages: "At the end she [Emaré] has not grown, changed or learned anything except how cruel and unjust people can be, especially relatives. She is unable to seek out her enemies and take vengeance on them, but must wait for them to repent and come to her.... Her ordeals require patience and endurance, rather than strength or courage. There seems to be a considerable degree of realism in these stories. I do not mean that many medieval women spent years drifting round the Mediterranean in tiny boats; but the isolation and vulnerability of women, particularly when married into a foreign community or one far from home, were no doubt very real problems as well as traditional literary themes." She also maintains that, in spite of some shift in trend as attested to by the works of Boccaccio or Christine de Pizan, most medieval romances are overwhelmingly concerned with male values and pursuits.⁶⁹

Jennifer Fellows says that three types of mothers are to be identified in ME romances: "at one end of the scale there are those

'calumniated wives'" including Emaré, in which group "the most positive representations of the maternal role in Middle English romance are to be found"; "at the other extreme," she continues, "is Bevis of Hampton's mother, who, having arranged the death of her husband and failed to arrange that of her son, has the latter sold into slavery. Occupying a greyer area between these extremes are the mothers of those children who are conceived out of wedlock or whose births involve some other sort of 'irregularity'." Among the mothers of the third type are those of Freine and Degaré. She then concludes: "In the romances in general...we find evidence that the medieval period was somewhat more sympathetic to female predicaments and less misogynistic than a study of its clerical writings alone might lead us to believe."⁶³

Flora Alexander, in her discussion of women in love in thirteenth-century romances, draws a slightly different picture. She claims that there are some stories where "the woman is psychologically as strong as her partner and equally determined in her pursuit of satisfaction," and that "at this time there was some taste for stories that showed women as resourceful, determined, and committed to the pursuit of satisfaction." She adds, however, that possibly "the story-tellers were responding to a desire felt by women in their audience, to imagine an autonomy and freedom of action denied them by their actual position in family and society."⁶⁴

Each of the above views certainly has some truth. But if we look at women in ME romances more in terms of the roles they play in the development of story than from the viewpoint of their particular behaviour or speech, they may emerge as more important and influential than they appear to be. However little Emaré has grown or

learnt, I would argue that she *is*, like the other heroines in the tail-rhyme lays, a *sine qua non* for the restoration of order in the romance.

3. 2.

Dame Tryamour in *Launfal* promises to endow the impoverished knight with wealth and prowess in return for his love: "She seyde, 'Sir Knyzt, gentyl and hende,/I wot þy stat, ord and ende;/Be nauzt aschamed of me./Yf þou wylt truly to me take,/And alle wemen for me forsake,/Ryche i wyll make þe./I wyll þe ȝeue an alner/Imad of sylk and of gold cler,/With fayre ymages þre;/As oft þou puttest þe hond þerinne,/A mark of gold þou schalt wynne,/In wat place þat þou be.'/Also sche seyde, 'Syr Launfal,/I ȝeue þe Blanchard, my stede lel,/And Gyfre, my owen knaue;/And of my armes oo pensel,/With þre ermyns ypeynted well,/Also þou schalt haue./In werre ne yn turnement,/Ne schall þe greue no knyghtes dent,/So well y schall þe saue.'"(ll.313–33) To this offer Launfal assents. As we have seen in 2.2., the fairy lady, after a long silence, comes to rescue the hero in a predicament: "Þan seyde sche to Artour þe Kyng,/‘Syr, hydyr i com for swych a þyng:/To skere Launfal þe knyzt:/Þat he neuer, yn no folye,/Besofte þe Quene of no drurye,/By dayes ne be nyzt.'" Then follows the blinding of Guinevere. Finally, she and the knight travel to Olyroun, the isle of pleasure, never to return.

The anonymous fairy lady in *Landevale* is of course not very unlike Tryamour, except for her behaviour at the final stage of the story: in the couplet lay the lady does not blind Guinevere, as we have already seen, but chides the knight because he has failed to keep their love secret, a proviso for giving him her assistance. Tryamour, by

contrast, does not even mention Launfal's breach of promise. Mehl explains where this difference comes from: the lady in *Landevale's* chiding is "clearly the language of *amour courtois* and Landevale's failure obviously is at the core of the whole poem. In *Sir Launfal* it seems only an episode, designed to make the happy ending the more perfect."²⁸ To Tryamour, rescuing the hero was evidently far more important than the manners of courtly love.

3. 3.

When the steward tells Emaré that he was ordered by the King, Emaré's husband, on an expedition to set her and her son adrift —the King's letter is one forged by the evil Queen Mother, though—, the heroine says to the bemoaning steward: "'Be styлле, syr,' sayde þe Qwene,/'Lette syche mornynge bene;/'For me haue þou no kare./'Loke þou be not shente,/'But do my lordes commaundement;/'God forbode þou spare!/'For he weddede so porely/'On me, a sympull lady,/'He ys ashamed sore./'Grete well my lord fro me;/'So gentyll of blode yn Cristyanté/'Gete he neuur more!'" (ll.625–36) Humbling herself as a simple (=of lowly origin) woman, she utters, a second later, almost threatening words, which are of course incongruous with the preceding lines. Since Emaré is in fact an Emperor's daughter, these words should not be interpreted as mere sour grapes; they rather recall her self-esteem and fortitude.

However ruthlessly ill fortune torments her, it is, after all, the heroine herself who arranges for a family reunion and restores order. She says to her husband, with whom she has been reunited earlier, and her son: "Emaré prayde her lord þe Kyng:/'Syr, abyde þat lordys komyng,/'That ys so fayr and fre./'And, swete syr, yn all

þyng,/Aqweynte ȝou wyth þat lordyng;/Hyt ys worshyp to
þe./The Kyng of Galys seyde þan,/‘So grete a lord ys þer non/In
all Crystyanté.’/‘Now, swete syr, whateuur betyde,/Aȝayn þat grete
lord ȝe ryde,/And all þy knyȝtys wyth þe.’/Emaré thawȝte her sone
ȝyngē./Aȝeyn þe Emperour komynge/How þat he sholde done:
/‘Swete sone, yn all þyng/Be redy wyth my lord þe Kyng,/And be
my swete sone!/When þe Emperour kysseth þy fadur so fre,/Loke
ȝyf he wylle kysse the:/Abowe þe to hym sone,/And bydde hym
come speke wyth Emaré,/That was putte ynto þe see;/Hymself ȝaf
þe dome.’” (ll.961–84) Thus she sees to it that her husband and son
prepare for the coming of the Father Emperor to Rome. Is not
resourceful just the word to describe this woman?²³

3. 4.

In the early part of *Toulouse*, Empress Beulybon attempts to
reconcile her husband with the Earl of Toulouse: “Now the Emperour
ys full woo:/He hath loste men and londe also;/Sore then syghed
hee;/He sware be Hym þat dyed on rode,/Mete nor drynke schulde
do hym no gode,/Or he vengedde bee./The Emperes seyde, ‘Gode
lorde,/Hyt ys better ye be acorde/Be oght that y can see;/Hyt ys
grete parell, sothe to telle,/To be agayne þe ryght quarell;/Be God,
thus thynketh me!’/‘Dame,’ seyde the Emperoure,/‘Y haue a grete
dyshonoure;/Therefore myn herte ys woo;/My lordys be takyn, and
some dede;/Therefore carefull ys my rede:/Sorowe nye wyll me
sloo.’/Then seyde Dame Beulybon:/‘Syr, y rede, be Seynt John,/Of
warre that ye hoo;/Ye haue the wronge and he þe ryȝt,/And that ye
may see in syȝt,/Be thys and othyr moo.’”(ll.133–56)

Though her persuasion does not avail at this stage, the Emperor

finally agrees to make peace with the Earl, who has rescued Beulybon from a predicament. After the Emperor's death, the Empress and the Earl marry. She is at once a victim of a malicious plot and a great arbitrator. Beulybon is indeed beautiful and good, as her name implies.²³

3. 5.

The Emperor of Almayne, whom Gowther serves as Hob the Fool, has a daughter dumb from birth. It is this princess alone who knows that the fool is in fact a penitent knight, and that he also joins the Emperor's battle against Saracens. She therefore feeds dogs so that Gowther can snatch food from them: "Non hym knew bot that bryghtt in bowr,/Tho dompe meydon schene./To chambur he went, dysharnest hym sone;/His hors, is armur away wer done:/He ne wyst wher hit myght bene./In hall he fond his lorde at meyt,/He seytt hym down and made is seytt,/Too small raches betwene./Tho meydon toke too gruhowndus fyn/And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn,/And putte a lofe in tho ton,/And in tho todur flesch full gud;/He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode,/That doghthy of body and bon."(ll.434-47)

Gowther is finally told that he has been forgiven. The dumb princess plays the role of God's messenger: "Ho seyde, 'My lord of heyvon gretys the well/And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell/And grantys the tho blys,/And byddus the speyke on hardely,/Eyte and drynke and make mery,/Thou schallt be won of his.'/Scho seyde to hur fadur, 'This is he,/That faght for yow deys thre,/In strong batell, ywys,'/Tho pope had schryvon syr Gother;/He lovye God and Maré ther,/And radly hym con kys."(ll.655-66) Gowther and the

princess, who have both regained their speech, marry.

3. 6.

We have so far examined the roles women play in the development of plot in the four tail-rhyme lays. Tryamour in *Launfal* and the dumb princess in *Gowther* both give succour to the heroes through their so to speak supernatural power, though the former's is fairy while the latter's is divine. Emaré and Beulybon in *Toulouse*, by contrast, are patient, persecuted wives; they are rescued by men, but at the same time, with their tolerance, piety and wisdom, help restore order once disturbed by men. Of whichever type, the women's roles are by no means secondary. And such influential women, notably the Emaré-Beulybon type, are not an isolated group of characters in tail-rhyme romances. We have, to name a few, the saintly Florence in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, and Claris in *Sir Cleges*, the pious wife of a spendthrift knight, who encourages and helps her poverty-stricken husband.

In marked contrast to the women in the tail-rhyme lays, female characters in the couplet lays scarcely act as saviours or arbitrators. Degaré's mother, Heurodys in *Orfeo*, Freine, and Dorigen in *Franklin* do suffer hardships, but none of them make a notable contribution to the solution of their problems. Even at the time when they are put in the foreground of the story, they strike us as somewhat passive. They seem to occupy what Fellows calls a greyer area.

4.

4. 1.

In all of the tail-rhyme lays, there are occasional references to the

Virgin Mary, while, among the couplet lays, her name appears only twice in *Freine*—in *Launfal* : “Ihesus, pat ys Heuene-kyng, / 3eue vs alle Hys blessing, / And Hys Modyr Marye! Amen. / EXPLICIT LAUNFAL.” (ll.1042–44), in *Emaré*: “And py modur Mary, Heuynqwene, / Bere our arunde so bytwene, / That semely ys of sight, / To py Sone pat ys so fre, / In heuen wyth hym pat we may be, / That lord ys most of myght.” (ll.7–12); “The lady fleted forþ alone; / To God of heuen she made her mone, / And to Hys Modyr also.” (ll.313–15); “Then she made her prayer / To Ihesu and Hys Modur dere, / In all pat she kowþe.” (ll.670–72), in *Toulouse*: “Thys Emperour had a wyfe, / The fayrest oon that euyr bare lyfe, / Saue Mary mekyll of myght,” (ll.37–39); “Be Mary, that swete floure!” (l.576), in *Gowther*: “Be meydon Maré mylde” (l.18); “Scho preyd to God and Maré mylde” (l.61); “‘Lorde, mercy,’ con he cry / To God that Maré bare.” (ll.236–37); “He preyd to God and Maré hynde, / That most is of posté;” (ll.238–39); “He lovyd God and Maré ther” (l.665). The Virgin is mentioned sometimes in a prayer and sometimes in an asseveration. In *Toulouse*, the heroine’s beauty is described as second only to Mary’s. Dürmüller suggests that “the line adds a moral dimension to ‘fayrest’ by linking it up closely with the Virgin.”⁶⁹

4. 2.

The cult of the Virgin was undoubtedly one of the most dominant religious movements in the Middle Ages. Eileen Power writes, “[the cult of the Virgin] spread with great rapidity and soon pervaded every manifestation of popular creed. It was already supreme by the eleventh century and remained supreme until the end of the Middle Ages. Great pilgrimages to the Virgin’s shrines, Chartres,

Rocamadour, Mont Saint-Michel, Laon, Soissons, Ipswich, Walsingham, and many scores more, criss-crossed the countries of Europe, while most great churches, not specifically her own, provided themselves with Lady Chapels.... Her miracles were on every lip, were enshrined in innumerable images and recorded in manuscripts and books.... They also provided the stock themes for miracle plays."⁶⁰ Given the references to Mary quoted in the previous section, it is of course impossible to think that this spread of the cult did not influence the generally pious makers of the tail-rhyme romances and their audiences.

Hiroe Futamura, in her essay on Chaucer's portrayal of mother and child, says that the figures of Mary and Jesus are reflected in Chaucer's depiction of Custance and her child drifting in a boat in *The Man of Law's Tale*, an analogue of *Emaré*. In this tale, as she points out, Custance prays to Mary for protection and "Cristes mooder — blessed be she ay! — /Hath shapen, thurgh hir endeless goodnesse,/To make an ende of al hir [Custance's] hevynesse," while in "The Tale of Constance" by Gower no mention is made of Mary.⁶² If so, *Emaré* and her son must also recall the Holy Mother and her Son. The heroine, like Chaucer's Custance, makes pathetic prayers to the Virgin, as we have seen in the previous section (ll.313—15;670—72). According to Mikiko Ishii, the Virgin, as *stella maris*, was believed to "rule the waves" and hence protect seafarers.⁶³ *Emaré* nurses her little son while they are drifting: "And when þe chylde gan to wepe,/Wyth sory hert she songe hyt aslepe,/And putte þe pappe yn hys mowth." (ll.661—63) This action is also fitting for Mother and Son symbolising Mary and Jesus. Ishii reports that the nursing Virgin was a favourite subject of paintings throughout the medieval period,

and even dates back to the late second century.⁶⁴

Empress Beulybon in the historical *Toulouse*, by contrast, may remind the audience more of women in the real world, given that the story is a little less fantastic than *Emaré*. The Empress, as we have seen, rejects and chides the knights who court her while the Emperor is away on an expedition. Power says, "While the lord was away at court or at war, who looked after his manor and handed it back again, with all walls in repair, farming in order and lawsuits fought when he returned?... —his wife. She had to be prepared to take his place at any moment, were she Queen Regent or obscure gentlewoman of Norfolk like Margaret Paston. In theory there was the romantic, lovely and capricious lady of chivalry, flirting and embroidering and playing chess; in practice there was more often an extremely hard-worked woman and a very hard nut to crack for her enemies."⁶⁵ The relatively respectable status of women was, however, not unrelated to the cult of the Virgin. As Ishii puts it, growing reverence for women in the period was instrumental in the spread of the cult, and vice versa.⁶⁶

Dame Tryamour in *Launfal* looks rather different from the Emaré-Beulybon type. John Speirs likens her to "a kind of Lady Bountiful or Fairy Godmother, the source of the miraculous prosperity." He adds, "Lady Tryamoure may in her mythological origins have been, like Diana, a goddess of the woods and of the moon," and the scene of a banquet she spreads before the knight "might indeed be an eyewitness report of one of those 'faery' feasts and rites which...were still celebrated by the devotees of some pre-Christian fertility cult in woods and wilderness in medieval Europe."⁶⁷ It is not very clear what Speirs means by "Lady Bountiful", but it is perhaps not very far from

a pagan Earth Mother. And the Earth Mother is, in fact, a distant ancestor of the Blessed Virgin and of Diana as well. Not a few researchers have pointed out that the cult of the Virgin is a Christian transformation of ancient worship of the Earth Mother. The Virgin nursing Jesus is, indeed, reminiscent of the goddesses of fertility like Isis in Egyptian myth.⁶⁸

What do the women in the tail-rhyme lays represent? No brief, smart answer is available. But it seems undeniable that the cult of the Virgin plays a certain role in all of these romances, whether they feature women, like Beulybon, more or less true to reality, or women, like Tryamour, from the fairy land who show more affinities with the pagan Earth Mother than with God's Mother.

4. 3.

I have elsewhere argued that female characters in *sekkyo* are, like those in the tail-rhyme lays, basically more determined and active than male ones: Lady Otohime in *Shintoku-maru*, who heals her leprous lover with a magic bamboo broom; Lady Terute in *Oguri*, who plays the most significant role in her lover Oguri's recovery from the state of *gakiami* or starving demon; Anjyu in *Sansho-dayu*, who helps her younger brother to escape from slavery at the cost of her own life....⁶⁹ In such miraculous ladies, according to Takeo Iwasaki, is reflected the image of *Kannon* (*Kuanyin*), a figure that may be likened to a merciful, nurturing mother, or even the Earth Mother of time immemorial.⁷⁰

Lady Terute, like Emaré, is set adrift by her own father, and prays to *Kannon* for protection. In fact, tales of a drifting noble woman, sometimes with her child, are scattered throughout western Japan, and

analogous tales are said to be almost ubiquitous in the world. Scholars point out that those ladies may also represent the Earth Mother, who can be at the same time a goddess of water, since the earth owes its fertility largely to water.⁶⁰

Needless to say, the ME romances and the Japanese tales are in no way each other's "sources and analogues" in the strict and academic sense of the phrase. However, one is fascinated by the idea that the ancient cult of mother deities, spread over the Eurasian continent, popped out, no matter how transfigured, in the medieval popular literature of two island countries situated at opposite edges of the continent, like a subterranean stream finding its way out.

5.

We have examined two features of the ME tail-rhyme lays—the tribulation-vindication-retribution pattern and the saviour/mediator-type heroine—which are basically absent in the couplet lays. The differences make the two groups look considerably unlike each other. With the first trait, the tail-rhyme lays may well be described as a body of popular tales with a vein of traditional Germanic literature. Is the Virgin/Earth Mother-like heroine characteristic of popular literature, though? I imagine that the cult of the Virgin, or nurturing Mother, and its literary representation, could have been more readily accepted by the robust and religious Midland populace than by more aristocratic Londoners under the sway of a largely patriarchal church hierarchy. Older, if not ancient, strata of beliefs far beneath the top layer of urbanity are often found lurking in provincial popular cultures, from which we "summon up remembrance of things past."

NOTES

- * This article is based on part of a paper read for Symposium 8 "Middle English Romance: Breton Lays" at the 66th Annual General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan held at Kumamoto University, Kumamoto on 21–22 May, 1994. See the acknowledgements in my forthcoming paper mentioned in (1) below.
- (1) Masaji Tajiri, "Middle English 'Breton Lays' – Two Traditions", which is also based on my symposium paper.
 - (2) I owe information on the dates of composition and dialects to Mortimer Donovan, "Breton Lays," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, Fascicule 1, gen. ed. J. B. Severs (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967) 133–43, which also contains synopses of the tales.
 - (3) A.M. Trounce, "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances," *Medium Ævum* 1(1932) 87–108, 168–82; 2(1933) 34–57, 189–98; 3(1934) 30–50. At(1932) 87 and 89.
 - (4) See, for example, Lillian H. Hornstein's remarks in Severs, gen. ed.(1967) 121–22.
 - (5) Masaji Tajiri, "'The sone rase bryght and schane' – the Theme of the Hero on the Beach in Middle English Tail-Rhyme Romances," *Journal of Osaka University of Foreign Studies*, new ser. 6(1991) 195–218. (The tail-rhyme lay *Emaré*, which also falls under the E-C-F-G group due to its story pattern, is one of the romances discussed there.) It is possible, however, that the theme is not limited to Germanic poetry, but is in fact almost ubiquitous all over the world. See my "How pitiful the lady was! – Some Common Features of English and Japanese Traditional Narratives," *Studies in the English-speaking World: Various Approaches* (Osaka: Osaka U of Foreign Studies, 1993) 43–61. At 53–56 and 60 (Note 30).
 - (6) A.J. Bliss, ed., *Thomas Chestre: Sir Launfal* (London: Nelson, 1960) 31–32.
 - (7) Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English*

- Romances* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1978) 173.
- (8) John Bernard Beston, "How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?" *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard UP, 1974) 319–36. At 333.
- (9) Bliss (1960) 26–27.
- (10) The text is taken from Walter H. French & Charles B. Hale, eds., *The Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1930). So are those of *Emaré* and *Toulouse* in what follows.
- (11) Bliss (1960) 43.
- (12) Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: RKP, 1968) 45. For further differences between the two analogues, see also, among others, Fumio Kuriyagawa, "*Sir Launfal* no Seiritsu (The Making of *Sir Launfal*)" [in Japanese] *Collected Papers of Fumio Kuriyagawa*, Vol.II, ed. Shinsuke Ando, *et al.* (Tokyo: Kinseido, 1982; Originally 1963) 651–64, my forthcoming paper mentioned in (1) above, and the following discussion in 3.2.
- (13) Tajiri (1993), which also contains synopses of some major *sekkyo* including *Sansho-dayu*.
- (14) In his talk with Hayao Kawai in Kawai, *Monogatari wo Monogataru* (Telling Tales)[in Japanese](Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1994) 262.
- (15) Cheryl Gene Colopy, "Into the Thick of the Forest: A Study of the Breton Lays in Middle English," (Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 1981) 60–61.
- (16) Donovan (1968) 143.
- (17) Mehl (1968) 86–87.
- (18) The text is taken from Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Six Middle English Romances* (London: Dent, 1973). The emendation is the editor's.
- (19) Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knight: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 175.
- (20) Susan Jane Hilligoss, "Conventional Style in Middle English Tail-Rhyme Romance," (Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 1977) 277.

- 21) See Mehl (1968) 92–93 and Urs Dürmüller, *Narrative Possibilities of the Tail-Rime Romance* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1974) 83–84. Emotional and sympathetic comments are also characteristic of the makers of Japanese *sekkyo*.
- 22) Freine, however, recalls the patient wife Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale*, a *Canterbury Tale*. Freine, in this sense, is not unlike the Eustance-Constance-Florence-Griselda group. See Donovan (1967) 135.
- 23) See Donald Sands, ed., *Middle English Verse Romances* (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1986) 202–03.
- 24) Elizabeth Archibald, "Women and Romance," *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. Henk Aertsen & Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1993) 153–69. At 162, 168.
- 25) Jennifer Fellows "Mothers in Middle English Romance," *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 41–60. At 43–44, 56.
- 26) Flora Alexander, "Women as Lovers in Early English Romance," Carol Meale, ed. (1993) 24–40. At 37–38.
- 27) Mehl(1968) 46–47. See also Kuriyagawa (1963) 663.
- 28) See Colopy (1980) 46, 66–67.
- 29) See Dürmüller (1974) 144. Lee C. Ramsey, on the other hand, sees in Beulybon and the Earl a pseudo-mother-son relation; the son fights to win the mother from the father represented by the Emperor. *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983) 172–74.
- 30) Dürmüller (1974) 94.
- 31) Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975) 19.
- 32) Hiroe Futamura, "Chaucer no Boshi-zo (Chaucer's Portrayal of Mother and Child)," [in Japanese] *Chaucer to Kirisuto-kyo* (Chaucer and Christianity), ed. Isamu Saito, et al. (Tokyo: Gaku-shobo, 1984) 51–72. At 57–59, 61. The text is taken from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Charcer*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1988).
- 33) Mikiko Ishii, *Seibo Maria no Nazo* (The Mystery of the Virgin Mary) [in Japanese](Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1988) 110–13.

- ③4 Ishii (1988) 11–61. Interestingly, nursing also appears in Gower, but not in Chaucer. In *Gowther*, nursing of the diabolic son is duly transformed: “His modur fell a fowle unhappe;/Apon a day bad hym tho pappe,/He snaffulld to hit soo,/He rofe the hed fro tho brest;/Scho fell backward and cald a prest,/To chambur fled hym froo.” (ll.124–29) This could have struck the medieval audience as an abhorrent counterpart of the familiar nursing of Jesus.
- ③5 Power (1975) 42–43.
- ③6 Ishii (1988) 115.
- ③7 John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 161–63.
- ③8 See, for example, Ishii (1988) and Eiichiro Ishida, *Momotaro no Haha: Aru Bunkashi-teki Kenkyu* (Momotaro’s Mother: A Cultural Historical Study)[in Japanese](Tokyo: Kodansha, 1984; originally 1955). The abridged English version of Ishida’s study, titled “Mother-Son Deities”, is in *Ishida Eiichiro Zenshu* (Collected Papers of Eiichiro Ishida) Vol.6 (Tokyo: Chikuma-shobo, 1971) 327–56. Note also that at least three of the heroines in the tail-rhyme lays are depicted as giving something to the heroes: Tryamour endows Launfal with wealth and prowess; Beulybon gives forty florins and a ring to the Earl of Toulouse; the dumb princess favours Gowther with foods. They are giving and protecting mother-like characters, so to speak.
- ③9 Tajiri (1993) 52–53.
- ④0 Takeo Iwasaki, *Sansho-dayu Ko* (A Study of *Sansho-dayu*)[in Japanese](Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1973), 115, 133–34.
- ④1 See, for example, Ishida (1984) 185–86, 236–37, and Michi Kita, *Boshin-shinko* (The Cult of Mother Deities)[in Japanese](Tokyo: Kinseisha, 1994) 92–93, 96. Kita and Ishii above both owe their arguments, to some extent, to Mircea Eliade.