



**HAL**  
open science

# 'Do The Right Thing' and Failing To Do So in The Erle of Tolous

Agnès Blandeau

► **To cite this version:**

Agnès Blandeau. 'Do The Right Thing' and Failing To Do So in The Erle of Tolous. *Études médiévales anglaises*, 2022, 2022-1 (99), pp.9-31. hal-04599498

**HAL Id: hal-04599498**

**<https://nantes-universite.hal.science/hal-04599498>**

Submitted on 3 Jun 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **‘Do The Right Thing’ and Failing To Do So in *The Erle of Tolous***

Agnès Blandeau

Nantes Université, UR 1162 CRINI

## INTRODUCTION

Dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the tail-rhyme romance *The Erle of Tolous* relates a riveting chivalric tale with a happy ending. It is tinged with piety, “sparse in the lexicon of courtesie, but rich in the terminology of subterfuge”<sup>1</sup>. The plot revolves around the woman-falsely-accused-of-adultery motif. Its narrative structure follows the familiar deprivation and restoration pattern, and the distinct episodes eventually bring to the rehabilitation of the two wronged protagonists, Syr Barnard of Tolous and Beulybon, empress of Almayn. The first crisis, a rupture with the initial harmony<sup>2</sup>, occurs when the eponymous knight-hero is outrageously dispossessed of his lands by Syr Dyoclysyen, the tyrannical emperor of Almayn. The second crisis involves the emperor’s wife. Virtuous Beulybon falls victim to a Machiavellian scheme devised by two of her husband’s retainers, whose advances she severely rebuffed. The felons’ iniquitous trick jeopardises her *fama* and dooms her to the stake unless a valiant champion clears her name. A close examination of the poem reveals a faultline between Beulybon’s infallible morality, mirrored in her exceptional looks, and the gravity of the offence to her honour which imperils her public image but also her life, cracking the façade of

---

<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1993. Chapter 4 “ ‘Winning by gyn’: the Auchinleck manuscript (ii)”, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis> . “Middle English *crise, crisis*, borrowed from Latin *crisis* “judgment, critical stage,” borrowed from Greek *krísis* “act of separating, decision, judgment, event, outcome, turning point, sudden change,” from *kri-*, variant stem of *krínein* “to separate, choose, decide, judge” + *-sis*, suffix forming nouns of action or process”.

this spotless incarnation of feminine and wifely perfection. In her husband's absence the lady's reputation is chipped, even fissured, yet her honesty and chastity are opportunely redressed by the gallant earl.

The article will attempt to explore the faults and blind spots that allow for an affront to the lady's good name and for shameful infractions to the knightly ethos embodied by the noble-hearted earl accomplishing high deeds. The protagonists of the tale, Syr Barnard and Beulybon, share a genuine yearning to do the right thing, which fittingly sees them through harrowing trials. The diegetic edifice of *The Erle of Tolous* has cracks here and there beneath the apparent seamless surface of both form and content. *Do the Right Thing* happens to be the title of a 1989 Spike Lee movie addressing issues of class, race and rage in a multiracial New York neighborhood. The film closes on two contradictory quotations, one from Martin Luther King rejecting the use of violence, the other from Malcolm X advocating violence in necessary self-defense. Neither the plot nor the epilogue clues the viewer to what the right thing is supposed to be, a notional ambiguity creating a productive uncertainty<sup>3</sup>. In *The Erle of Tolous*, what does 'Do the Right Thing' mean? The chivalric and courtly (to a lesser extent) veneer of this edificatory narrative of wrong righted is not as consistently smooth as it may seem. Delving into the text from the interpretive perspective of this congress's theme, *failles*, will help to spot some rents and breaks in an effective, well-oiled fictional machinery artfully thought out and structured<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> David Sterritt, *Spike Lee's America*, Polity Press, 2013, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> W.A. Davenport, "Sir Degrevant and Composite Romance", in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson, eds. *Medieval Insular Romance. Translation and Innovation*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, [1997] 2000, p. 131. Like *Sir Degrevant* analysed by Davenport, *The Erle of Tolous* can be described as a well-constructed and unified narrative. Another scholar, Edwards, closely examines a popular Middle English romance which shares a number of plot and theme similarities with *The Erle of Tolous*. See A.S.G. Edwards, "Gender, Order and Reconciliation in *Sir Degrevant*", in Carol M. Meale, ed. *Readings in Medieval English Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994, 53-64. Edwards concludes his article by stressing the fact that the targeted audience was most probably the gentry finding the social concerns of *Sir Degrevant* relevant. The same could be said about the readers and/or listeners of *The Erle*

## 1 CRACKS IN A PICTURE OF PERFECTION

The geological sense of *faultline* is semantically akin to *fail(ing)*<sup>5</sup>, among whose equivalents are *default* and *defect*. *Fail(ure)* evokes inadequacy caused by defection or aptness to come short of duty. Besides it means to not perform something expected or required. The eleven occurrences of the “wythowt fayle” formula throughout *The Erle of Tolous* draw attention to what lies inside the gangue of the text and the story that it recounts: some narrative rifts and structural clefts, poetic and generic ruptures in the tradition of the medieval English romance, and occasional interstices through which transpire some shortcomings to the knightly code of conduct and breaches of the law and ethics. Doing the right thing or making the right choice defines the hero and heroine’s common quest thwarted by either wickedness and greed (Dyoclysyas’s) or manipulation and *gyn*<sup>6</sup> (at the hands of the deceitful knights acting very much like *losengiers*). *Gyn* is a Middle English term designating a malicious purpose pursued by devious means. Several dishonest characters in *The Erle of Tolous* resort to *gyn* with the intention to harm. Furthermore *gyn* refers to a “machine or structure used in assaulting or defending fortifications”<sup>7</sup>, a definition that fits a poem in which violence, lies and fraud (blatant ethical faults) weaken the fortress of Syr Barnard’s baronial rights and status in the first part of the story, and that of Beulybon’s aura of exemplarity in the second section. In either episode, the stronghold is perfidiously made to crack and falter on its foundations. The one

---

*of Tolous*. This milieu, Edwards writes, was preoccupied with justice and power. The question underlying the diegesis in either case is how to get the balance right between the claims of justice and the claims of the powerful.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, prepared by, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. V, Oxford, Clarendon Press, [1989] 1991, 767, definition of *fault*.

<sup>6</sup> Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1993. Chapter 4 “ ‘Winning by gyn’ : the Auchinleck manuscript (ii)”, p. 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

true knight in the tale, the Erle, wholeheartedly repairs the fissures caused in the edifice of the wifely ideal that Beulybon epitomises.

In his ruthless reprisal against the emperor Syr Barnard deems that he is in his own right, an opinion shared by Syr Dyoclysyen's wise and temperate wife, "moost bryght" (45) and "gode in all thyng" (40). She sets out to reason her husband, praying him to "[d]elyvyr the Erle hys ryght" (48). The word "ryght" recurs in the third line (51) of the following stanza (49-60).

"Dame," he seyde, "let that bee;  
That day schalt thou nevyr see,  
Yf y may ryde on ryght,  
That he schall have hys lond agayne;  
Fyrste schall y breke hys brayne,  
Os y am trewe knyght!  
He warryth faste in my londe  
I schall be redy at hys honde  
Wythyn thys fourteen nyght!"  
He sente abowte everywhare,  
That all men schulde make them yare  
Agayne the Erle to fyght.

Adamant, the bellicose emperor retorts: "Fyrste schall y breke hys brayne, / Os y am trewe knyght !" (53-54). In the tail (53) our attention is caught by "knyght" which rhymes with "ryght". Thus paired "ryght" and "knyght" metrically represent a breach of the chivalric moral standards since an honest knight would certainly not speak those infamous words. Syr Dyoclysyen's threat to break his opponent's brain (53) flouts the latter's just claim to be treated fairly in accordance with justice, law and rightness. Shamelessly the hateful lord fails to do right by a vassal whom he expects to dispose of in no time.

The romance “muddies the waters<sup>8</sup>”, blurs demarcations. Preoccupied with matters of *trowthe* and *ryght*, words that recur throughout the text<sup>9</sup>, *The Erle of Tolous* strikes as a tale of slander, betrayal, breaches of feudal relations of confidence, and of *trowthe* plighted but promises seldom kept. “The plot is punctuated by agreements and betrayals<sup>10</sup>”, arrangements are flawed from the start, and the oaths given contain dents and rents through which falsehood oozes in. Still, first and foremost *The Erle of Tolous* portrays a lady honest to a fault. Beulybon finds herself villainously accused of adultery yet eventually proved innocent by an admirer prone to act as her *cavalier servente*<sup>11</sup> probably because he is himself a robbed landowner and humiliated lord (28-29) at the beginning of the tale. Shortly afterwards Syr Barnard is viciously ambushed in a failed attempt against his life (413-453). Nevertheless the last three lines of the opening stanza sound rather misleading. “How a lady had grete myschefe, / And how sche covyrd of hur grefe; / Y pray yow take hede!” They suggest that the main protagonist is female whilst the title of the romance refers to a male hero socially defined by his title. In other words a disjunction resides between what the title announces and the prologue’s promising pitch — which rings like a film teaser. The reader becomes aware of a somehow confusing rift between the motif stated at the end of the incipit (a lady’s unjustly tarnished image) and the account of the political feud opposing the earl to the emperor which at the beginning of the second stanza

---

<sup>8</sup> Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance. Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2008, p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> James Wade, “Confession, Inquisition and Exemplarity in *The Erle of Tolous* and Other Middle English Romances”, in Mary C. Flannery and Katie L. Walter, eds., *The Culture of Inquisition in Medieval England*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, Westfield Medieval Studies, vol. 4, 2013, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Arlyn Diamond, “*The Erle of Tolous: The Price of Virtue*”, in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson, eds. *Medieval Insular Romance. Translation and Innovation*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, [1997] 2000, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Burrow, “The Uses of Incognito: *Ipomadon A*” in Carol M. Meale, ed. *Readings in Medieval English Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994, p. 30. Burrow writes that the “glory accumulates undiminished until the knight proves that he is the best knight and *cavaliere servente* or *dru*.” He adds that each time the Earl of Tolous intervenes to save Beulybon “his increments (and smooths out) his chivalric honour”.

serves as a diegetic starter. Even though the proem advertises the fiction of a highly esteemed yet vulnerable noblewoman, only at a later stage in the plot is she actually beguiled and called a “false hore” (786)<sup>12</sup>.

The second part of the poem, which comes after the encounter of the empress and the earl, justifies their blossoming complicity of hearts and spirits that reaches an acme when Syr Barnard intercedes in combat for the slighted lady. As Amanda Hopkins points out, the primary dramatic function fulfilled by the eponymous protagonist can be summed up as follows: the resolution of the first crisis hinging upon his person advances the plot towards the next crisis, which this time revolves around the empress<sup>13</sup>. After he has shown himself a trust- and praise-worthy knight in the first episode of the tale, the earl of Tolous does the right thing in restoring the lady’s irreproachable reputation. However, the snag is his massive slaughter of the emperor’s troops, expatiated over seventy-four lines (58-132). The detailed description of the outburst of violence is a rather uncomfortable and embarrassing trait in the portrayal of an upstanding hero since it constitutes a faultline that shakes the deontological foundation of knighthood, tears its quintessential material. From a twenty-first-century reader’s perspective, the gap between Syr Barnard’s heroism (“Hyt ys Syr Barnard of Tollous, / A nobyll knyght and a chyvalrous, / That hath done thys journey”, 1175-1177) and his fierce riposte to Syr Dyoclysyen’s provocation may be accounted for by the rules of a genre which sees no contradiction between knightly prowess and ferocious feats of arms ending in a bloodbath. As Scott Pincikowski observes,

---

<sup>12</sup> Amanda Hopkins, “Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays”, in Phillipa Hardman, ed. *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2002, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

violence is “an integral part of courtly society and a necessary tool used in various ways to legitimate the rule of those in power<sup>14</sup>”.

Because Syr Barnard is “falsely” (20) “dyssheryted” (19) of his estate, he “saun fayle” (35) seeks revenge on the “harde” (26) Dyoclysyan who “dyd hym wronge, / And other men also” (32-33). In the light of Spike Lee’s movie mentioned in the introduction to this article, it could be observed that the brutality with which the earl of Tolous invades and burns his enemy’s lands (36) resonates with Malcolm X’s advocacy of violence as a necessary evil to fight racial discrimination. Knighthood, idealized in courtly romance, according to Albrecht Classen, is a “highly bloody and gory affair”, as both historical and fictional knights “proved to be little but simple killing machines without any emotions for their victims<sup>15</sup>”. To borrow from the semantic field of medieval iconography, a crack in the oil painted panel of *The Erle of Tolous* is noticeable when the hardy fighter strikes back with barbaric violence. Ironically his response suggests that he is flawed as a knight, and to some extent duplicates his attacker’s spiteful belligerence. It is tempting to judge dishonourable Syr Barnard’s brutal onslaught (his anger gives him the strength of ten<sup>16</sup>) since it results in dreadful bloodshed. The death toll alarmingly amounts up to sixty thousand victims “wythowte fayle” (122) amongst the emperor’s army against twenty slain only (128) in the earl’s ranks. As a matter of fact the egregious discrepancy between such unrealistic figures with regard to human losses is a common feature in the depiction of spectacular combat scenes in medieval romance. In the long description of the deadly battle brought about by Dyoclysyan’s abrupt rupture of the feudal

---

<sup>14</sup> Scott E. Pincikowski, “Violence and Pain at Court: Comparing Violence in German Heroic and Courtly Epics”, in Albrecht, ed., *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature. A Casebook*, New York & London, Routledge, 2004, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Albrecht Classen, “Violence in the Shadows of the Court”, introduction to Albrecht Classen, ed. *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature. A Casebook*. New York & London, Routledge, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *The Erle of Tolous*, “An hundred men that day he slowe, / so wyght he was yn were!”, lines p. 95-96.



covenant, emphasis is laid on the sound and the fury. The fighters, their steeds and armour reach a breaking point under tremendous physical strain virtually made audible through poetic artistry. “Full hedeous hyt was to here” (90). The poet amply borrows from the semantic field of deafening clash, clatter, and crash to paint a nightmarish picture of skull bones fractured despite the protection of helmets and of coats of mail rented by “swerdys and axes” (89) as lethal blows are dealt by the thousand. “There were schyldys and schaftys schakydde, / Hedys thorough helmys crakydde, / And hawberkys all totore” (91-93). The *sch*, *h*, and *k* alliterations heighten the morbidly graphic sight and sound rendition of a gruesome massacre in which valor has crossed the line into the utmost degree of violence. We are dealing with a type of fiction in which savage warfare is a set piece.

The other set piece proper to the genre is the impatiently-awaited love plot, the counterpart plot which brings together the knight and the heroine far from a madding crowd of warring knights, inside a church instead when they first meet and then at court where, disguised as a monk-confessor, the earl has the confirmation that the lady is truthful and subsequently sets out to defend her.

## 2 A PLOT LIKE A DIPTYCH

Underlying the plot of *The Erle of Tolous* is the recurrence of an action or a situation, namely a repetitive, or dual, pattern that calls to mind the medieval diptych. The diptych consists of two wooden panels separated by a thin interstice so the panels can be closed in the manner of a book. A case in point of the diptych structure of the poem are the two encounters between the lovers. The first one involves an equivocal gesture. The lady gives the knight, dressed as a hermit, a valuable ring and a generous amount of money too. This gift is a tough nut to crack in that it fissures the veneer of her acute sense of the right conduct. It

suggests a divide or crevice between her supposed inaccessibility as a sovereign and her surprising closeness to a total stranger who looks a pauper. Beulybon's giving an intimate accessory of feminine grace<sup>17</sup> might be construed as an illustration of "the courtly romance token of an unsaid unfailing bond of utter devotion<sup>18</sup>". This flaw in the picture of Beulybon's uprightness gives food for thought and represents a blind spot in this complex "romaunse" (1198). In truth, the earl's receiving from her a secret token of her special attention serves a specific dramatic purpose. It motivates his infallible engagement to clear her name while toning down her perplexing adulterous desire. Because the scene takes place inside a church what could be suspected to be a marital fault on Beulybon's part is conveniently absolved by her selfless act of charity and whole-souled piety. Nevertheless at this point of the tale one cannot help detecting a fissure of the text<sup>19</sup> inside which lies the ambiguity of a grey area of interpretation. Any presumably monolithic discourse contains fissures in the sense of alternative or "sub-versions"<sup>20</sup>, Delphine Horvilleur remarks. The feminine figure of the pious and devoted empress signifying in silence her irrepressible attraction to the earl come incognito to gaze at her fair features enacts the temptation of the supposedly unfailing marital vow.

---

<sup>17</sup> Arlyn Diamond, "The Erle of Tolous: The Price of Virtue", in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson, eds. *Medieval Insular Romance. Translation and Innovation*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, [1997] 2000, p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> James Wade, "Confession, Inquisition and Exemplarity in *The Erle of Tolous* and Other Middle English Romances", in Mary C. Flannery and Katie L. Walter, eds., *The Culture of Inquisition in Medieval England*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, Westfield Medieval Studies, vol. 4, 2013, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Boyarin quoted by Delphine Horvilleur, *En tenue d'Ève. Féminin, pudeur et judaïsme*, Paris, Éditions Points, 2013, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Delphine Horvilleur, *En tenue d'Ève. Féminin, pudeur et judaïsme*, Paris, Éditions Points, 2013, p. 167. "Toute tradition abrite des discours minoritaires et des voix souterraines. Chaque narratif porte (ou cache) des versions alternatives, ou voilées. Ces versions, qui défient ou questionnent la norme établie, sont aussi traditionnelles que les versions dominantes ou autorisées. Elles ont autant de légitimité à se trouver là, malgré leur moindre visibilité. Elles constituent des « sub-versions », titillant la face officielle, sous la surface, à la manière d'un palimpseste révélé à celui qui gratte la surface de l'écrit."

When they meet for the second time Syr Barnard probes the lady's allegedly blameless morality. He takes the disguise of a monk so that he can verify her wifely devotion at confession. The fake confession, surprisingly authorised by the abbot, who happens to be Beulybon's uncle, insinuates that the earl is guilty of a sacramental violation. However, the moral fault the empress is suspected of at court is presented as the catalyst of the earl's salutary intercession on her behalf. Syr Barnard's *prima facie* infraction to a precept of the Christian Church is remitted by his need to ensure that he will fight for a just cause. Actually, the benefits of the test he puts her to under a false identity is twofold. Just as his martial victory over the slanderous chamber knights restores the empress's honour, so it reestablishes the earl of Tolous in his initial aristocratic possessions and privileges, and even reconciles him with his enemy. Better yet Syr Dyoclysyen promotes him to a more enviable position of power: "The romaunse tellyth soo. / He made hym steward of hys londe / And sesyd agayne into hys honde / That he had rafte hym froo" (1198-1201). Presumably Syr Barnard has done the right thing, all the more so as his commitment to Beulybon earns him, after her husband's death, a love marriage that smooths out all the fault(line)s. One obvious fault Syr Barnard could be reproached with is revealed after he has laid eyes on the beauteous empress. Stricken by the *mal d'amour* he secretly wishes she were not married so as to serve her with utter devotion. "That y myght be hur fere, / And that sche no husbände hadde". In other words the honorable earl makes a positively unknighly wish to see the emperor dead, not for a matter of honour nor owing to a political fallout this time. At this specific point of the story chivalry and courtesy intermingle, and the reader senses that fissures can be filled in, cuts can be sealed/healed.

Beulybon's *cri de cœur*, her impassioned protest and complaint when blemished by the slander (which impairs her repute of faithful wife and her aura of godly and high-minded empress) testify to her unfailing sense of equity. 'Do

the right thing', the motto that seems to define her demeneanour, is her Achilles heel. Her faith in the reliability of the two knights appointed by her husband for her security during his absence is soon proven misdirected. In fact the two bodyguards plot to gain her favours to satisfy their lust but, vexed by her sharp admonition, they hatch an elaborate scheme to smear her good name by passing her off as a wanton woman. To achieve their goal they will go to any lengths, including murder as they trick Beulybon's young carver into the lady's bedchamber and then kill him lest he reveal their villainy. These fissures taint the painting of "men chyvalrous" (170) "of grete renowne" (180), of "trowthe" to "holden" (291) and "covenant to fulfyll" (290). Cracks show in this world so dear to the earl enamoured with a "lady free" (324) "so bryght of blee!" (333). The chivalric creed Syr Barnard abides by is blatantly ignored by other knights, who play foul and fail to be up to the standards of their social role as fighters and protectors. This divide that keeps him apart from his caste may indicate that chivalric romance is falling into obsolescence in the literary landscape of late medieval England. In fact the genre reflects the "this-worldly and lay Christian concerns<sup>21</sup>" of an increasingly diverse readership. Murray Evans expounds the growing hybridity of popular romance, in which occasional pious segments "alternate and are interspersed with chivalrous and courtly sections<sup>22</sup>". Another scholar sees a floating line that separates "the romance notion of chivalry, defense of the weak, and its excess, violent combat<sup>23</sup>". *The Erle of Tolous* ties in with both comments on a prolific medieval genre.

---

<sup>21</sup> Murray J. Evans, « Romances in Composite Manuscript Contexts I: *Sir Isumbras*, the "Isumbras-Group", and Homiletic Romance », in *Rereading Middle English Romance. Manuscript, Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure*. Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>23</sup> Jean E. Jost, "Why Is Middle English Romance So Violent?", in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature. A Casebook*. New York & London, Routledge, 2004, p. 243.

The protagonists' mishaps, the moral and physical offences that they suffer, suggest that the story told in *The Erle of Tolous* is dotted and dented with several obstacles eventually overcome, infringements successfully resolved in an epilogue that reconciles oppositions, repairs cracks, corrects failings, and redresses wrongs. Be they moral or formal, the breaches discernable in the form and content of *The Erle of Tolous* do not shade the picture. If on reading the poem the overall impression is one of a pleasurable brisk and eventful tableau vivant in which the speaking *I* deftly attempts to bridge gaps or seal breaches for the sake of narrative consistency, at times one is aware of a few narratorial intrusions that diffract the diegetic linearity and antagonise its fluidity.

### 3 NARRATIVE JUMP CUTS AND BREACHES OF CONDUCT

The poet shares with other late medieval romance makers a predilection for “narrative ellipsis and truncation<sup>24</sup>”. *The Erle of Tolous* indeed betokens a taste for narrative gaps or jump cuts, to put it in cinematic terms. For instance immediately after the incipit the story of the eponymous knight-hero opens on a faultline which blacks out a cause and effect link. The narrative jumps over the logical connection. Overnight without the slightest justification Syr Barnard is despoiled, probably evicted from Syr Dyoclysyen's retinue. The emperor's rash decision might be ascribed to an intention to test the strength of vassalic lealty — which he tramples in doing so. Let us return to the film language metaphor of the jump cut. Contrary to the match cut concerned with space and time continuity between two scenes, the jump cut draws attention to the transition, abrupt and unexplained mostly. “Whereas most editing techniques are designed to “hide” the

---

<sup>24</sup> Rosalind Field, “Patterns of Availability and Demand in Middle English Translations de romançz”, 73-89, in Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, and Judith Weiss, eds., *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. 89.

edit, a jump cut is a stylistic choice that makes the edit completely visible<sup>25</sup>”. The text contains several jump cuts and ruptures. A narratorial intrusion at lines 163 and 166 signals a sudden change of scenes. The character focalised upon is no longer the emperor frustrated by his crushing defeat but his victorious opponent, Syr Barnard.

He wente away and syghed sore;  
Oon worde spake he no more,  
But held hym wonder style.  
*Leve we now the Emperour in toght:*  
Game ne gle lyked hym noght,  
So gretly can he grylle!  
*And to the Erle turne we agayn [...]. (160-166). (Italics mine).*

The episode of the false retainers’ lies is interrupted, left pending at the exact climactic moment of Beulybon’s unfair imprisonment for alleged conjugal treason — the next step in her disgrace being burning at the stake. At this moment the narrator aptly wraps up the cliffhanger with a compassionate exclamation. “They bonde the lady wondyr faste / And in a depe preson hur caste: / Grete dele hyt was to see!” (800-802). With a sudden change of direction and tone the next stanza begins. “Leve we now thys lady in care, / And to hur lorde [Syr Dyoclysyen] wyll we fare, / That ferre was hur froo” (803-805). The tail line, “That ferre was hur froo”, aptly points to the geographical distance that separates the spouses, symbolic of a breach into which the traitors jump to work evil and sow discord at the imperial court. A third example of a narrative jump cut can be identified at lines 926-934. Lamenting over the empress’s predicament, the earl swears he will repair to his enemy’s land to “have trewe quarrell to fyght” (930) and save Beulybon from infamy. As his monologue closes we expect a concise account of his journey to Germany. Instead the first line of the new stanza relates the circumstances of his encounter with a merchant: “He rode on huntynge on a

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-a-jump-cut/>

day, / A marchand met he be the way” (932-933). There seems to be a deflection, a warp, a slight inconsistency as the hunt seems at variance with Syr Barnard’s determination (that nothing could dent) to go and redress the wrong done to Beulybon.

Furthermore the break can also reside in the specific metre of *The Erle of Tolous*, where the tail line sometimes strikes as a fault line, so to speak. An unshakeable faith in the immutability of a pledge, a pillar of the knightly ethic, blinds the “doghty knyght” (107) to the treachery of Syr Trylabas and his two sidekicks, Kaunters and Kaym, “[f]alser men myght no man rayme” (431). In his thorough and unflinching observance of the chivalric dogma the hero fails to suspect his prisoner’s duplicity when the latter promises he will give him the opportunity to catch sight of Beulybon renowned for her peerless beauty: “Y triste to the as to my frende, / Wythowte any stryfe” (230-231). The shorter line, the tail, creates a salient break in the regularity of the metre, thus enhancing the earl’s earnest tone. About the metrical tail-rhyme Rhiannon Purdie remarks that “the unifying feature (that holds the tail-rhyme stanza together) is the way in which the rhyming couplets (triplets sometimes) are stitched together by a repeated b-line (tail-line), emphasised by its shortness<sup>26</sup>”. To some extent the tail-line can be perceived as a rupture which paradoxically ensures the stability of the twelve-line stanza, an edifice of asymmetric units.

The Erle answerd wyth wordys hende:  
“Y tryste to the as to my frende,  
Wythowte any stryfe;  
Anon that we were buskyd yare,  
On owre jurney for to fare,  
For to see that wyfe;  
Y swere be God and Seynt Andrewe,  
Yf hyt be so y fynde the trewe,  
Ryches schall be to the ryfe.”

---

<sup>26</sup> Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance. Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2008, p. 4. At page 182, she remarks that the stanza form of *The Erle of Tolous* is aa4b3cc4b3dd4b3ee4b3.

They lettyd nothyr for wynde not wedur,  
But forthe they wente bothe togedur,  
Wythowte any stryfe. (229-240)

This particular twelve-line tail-rhyme stanza (229-240) hints at one crack in the wall of the ideal-*ised* world depicted in this late medieval English romance. At this point in the diegesis the fly in the ointment is the speech of the perfidious antagonist whose lies are discordant with Syr Barnard's earnest words of confidence in a man he now misapprehends as his friend. Trylabas deceives the earl who has the weakness of believing him to be sincerely repentant and desirous to take him to the chapel where the pious empress will be at prayer. The ransomed prisoner swears fidelity to his new lord, but the insistence with which Trylabas claims he will serve the earl from now on conceals feigned fealty that portends his violation of a "covenant" (218) that he sounds so eager to seal with Syr Barnard. "And nevyr more, wythowte fayle, / Agayne yow to bee; / Y schall be trewe, by Goddys ore" (224-226). As for Beulybon, she suspects Syr Trylabas's "false sleythe" (288). He has indeed imparted to her his intention to murder the earl whom his poisonous words to the lady misrepresents as a sworn enemy. Indignant, the empress reminds the devious man of the moral contract that binds him to Syr Barnard who magnanimously released him from the ransom he had imposed on him. The lady admonishes the slanderous knight.

"Y rede the holde thy trowthe !  
Certys, yf thou hym begyle,  
Thy soule ys in grete paryle,  
Syn thou haste made hym othe;  
Certys, hyt were a traytory,  
For to wayte hym wyth velany;  
Me thynkyth hyt were rowthe!" (291-297).

Her reprimand denotes a cleft between Trylabas's implicit reference to Syr Barnard's gentillesse (in lifting his punishment on the condition that he enabled him to approach the empress) and his vicious suggestion to murder the earl when the latter is the least on his guards because he is yearning to see Beulybon.



#### 4 FISSURES CAN BE FILLED, GAPS CAN BE BRIDGED

The popularity of a medieval English romance depends on its vivid evocation of a true gentil *bellator* anxious to heal injuries and redress wrongs made to a virtuous lady. Syr Barnard's outstanding feats of arms efficaciously propel the narrative forward<sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless one discrepancy with the chivalric ideal worth noting is when the earl of Tolous risks his life to redress Beulybon's honour: he does so only after he has appraised her earnestness. Disguise, the trick he uses, could be interpreted as a faux pas committed by a paragon of knighthood. Once again he breaks a rule after his fierce retaliation against Syr Dyoclysyen. The aforementioned carnage narrative unit is replete with detailed close-ups of horrid mutilations. The wronged knight's violence spree causes gaping cuts deep in his victims' flesh. These foreshadow the wounds in the empress's image.

In the second section of the tale a rift opens between the misfortune that befalls her and her admirable reaction. Indeed she ungrudgingly refrains from denouncing the two knights' indecorous advances made to their lord's spouse although they are "Worthy to be hanged and to-drawe" (572). For insulting the faithful wife of an emperor the foul retainer deserves to be hanged and quartered, she states severely. The empress's reminder of the horrendous punishment that the chamber knights incur, a body dismantled and torn to pieces, echoes the atrocities of the battle fought in the first section of the tale between her husband and the earl of Tolous. It appears ironic that her magnanimous silence over the malicious men's *lèse majesté*, a most severe fault, should turn against her. One of the villainous guardians of her safety begs for her forgiveness, which she unadvisedly grants. He jumps into the breach to press her into keeping his 'love declaration' secret. "Thynke, madam, youre trowthe ys plyght / To holde

---

<sup>27</sup> Donna Crawford, " 'Gronyng wyth grysly wounde': Injury in Five Middle English Breton Lays" in Carol M. Meale, ed. *Readings in Medieval English Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994, p. 51.

counsaille bothe day and nyght” (581-582). Shamelessly he sneaks into an ethical rift, namely the opportunity represented by the great store that the incorruptible lady sets by a pledge. She grants him her pardon. “Also longe os y leve, / Counsayle schall hyt bee; / Loke thou be a trewe man / In all thyng that thou can / To my lorde so free” (587-591). The private conversation between Beulybon and the other knight unfolds virtually in the same manner, which confirms that the lady’s fidelity to her husband (and to the fundamental tenet of oath-taking oft illustrated in courtly chivalric tales) remains unswerving.

Under trial when infamously accused of sleeping with the young carver in her husband’s absence, Beulybon’s endurance is on the verge of breaking up. The admirable spotlessness that she stands for, body and soul, is brutally chinked and within an inch of precipitating her into a bottomless crevice of disgrace. The calumny that she faces is physically signified by the “depe preson” (801) into which she is thrown without fair judgment. “Grete dele hyt was to see!”, laments the narrator in an aside (802). Detained, she is almost blotted out of court. She is to be exposed in public and incurs the cruellest penalty if she fails to be righted in time. On the meagre legal grounds of her guilt she is shut off from view in the most infamous part of the castle. A degrading interstitial space, the gaol cuts her off from the public space and deprives her of her role of a sovereign’s wife. The instigators of the “crisis”, in the sense of a disruptive danger, are two invidious insiders bent on slyly working harm, defaming Beulybon and widening the chink in the armour of marital engagement and dedication.

Legal or moral, ruptures appear all along the plot, and often do so following a duplicatory pattern. The conducts of Beulybon and Syr Barnard are honorable and decorous, unerring and commendable. She dare assert to her husband that she finds fault with his unmotivated affront to the earl — “Ye have the wronge and he the ryght” (155). As for Syr Barnard, he “wolde aventure hys lyfe to fyght / For that lady free” (918-919). Syr Dyoclysyan typifies the exact opposite. His

incapacity to envisage making amends for the unexplained wrong he did the earl positions the emperor on the side of felony. It implies that the latter's political legitimacy is intrinsically faulty, thereby blameworthy, that his abuse of authority is a scourge in the sense of the French word *fléau*, to which the English *flaw* sounds close. As for Trylabas's duplicitous attitude to Syr Barnard, to whom he swore loyalty upon his release from captivity, it could be read as the inverted image of the earl turning against Dyoclysyen by force of circumstance. Even if he implacably decimates the imperial forces and ransoms the prisoners at the highest price (169-174), the earl of Tolous, "A nobyll knyght and a chyvalrous" (1176), acts thus because he seeks reparation — and legitimately (?) prepares for battle (30-34). The ultimate question raised in the tale is whether his reaction is the right one. It seems that he does the right thing as his defense of the empress leads, after her husband's death, to a love marriage that eventually smooths out all the fault(line)s and ruptures.

At the end of the day, it is up to the readers and audience of *The Erle of Tolous* to decide what the right thing means from peering closely between the cracks and into the interstices of the narrative. All the challenges and pitfalls in the plot are overcome by the two protagonists in their unflinching faith that right will eventually prevail.

## CONCLUSION

The story of *The Erle of Tolous* is that of a virtuous married lady who "schall to dethe goo / All agayne the ryght" (as the abbot deplores at lines 1011-1012) yet escapes the worst fate thanks to Syr Barnard's readiness to combat for her "There to stonde wyth ryght" (1042). It is therefore in the second half of the tale, when military prowess gives way to unavowed, thereby unconsummated, love that the knight-hero enters the scene again following the interstitial episode

of the unfair court trial<sup>28</sup>. Contained in Lincoln Cathedral Library “Thornton” 91, the text belongs to a group of romances which includes *Libeaus Desconus* and *Sir Isumbras*<sup>29</sup>. These popular romances are targeted for a public fond of matters of chivalry<sup>30</sup> and at the same time reading for the moral<sup>31</sup>. As in most manuscripts from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, the romances in “Thornton” coexist with saints’ lives, devotional material, or items of practical and instructional value. Such textual heterogeneity indicates that medieval readers certainly did not perceive any rifts or faultlines between the diverse contents and sections of manuscripts like “Thornton”<sup>32</sup>.

One last chink in the (rock) structure of *The Erle of Tolous* is its explicit where the poem is loosely designated by its anonymous author: “Yn Rome thys geste cronyculyd ywys ; / A lay of Bretayne callyd hyt ys, / And evyr more schall bee”. (1214-1216). The metapoetic coda sounds unhinged, almost additional. At first blush the fracture between the two literary markers, “geste” and “lay of Bretayne”, seems barely bridgeable and resembles some generic diffraction. The faint connection between the two distinct poetic categories likely defies our notion of clear-cut textual classifications. Still, medievalists are mindful of the labile generic demarcations not only within a manuscript but also within an individual text. *The Erle of Tolous* attests the poet’s skillful handling of the

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert Rouse, “Walking (between) the Lines: Romance as Itinerary/Map” in Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon, eds. *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2011, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> Murray J. Evans, “Romances in Composite Manuscript Contexts I: *Sir Isumbras*, the “*Isumbras-Group*”, and Homiletic Romance”, in *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Carol M. Meale, “‘Gode men / Wiues maydnes and alle men’ : Romance and Its Audiences” in Carol M. Meale, ed. *Readings in Medieval English Romance*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> James Wade, “Confession, Inquisition and Exemplarity in *The Erle of Tolous* and Other Middle English Romances”, in Mary C. Flannery and Katie L. Walter, eds., *The Culture of Inquisition in Medieval England*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, Westfield Medieval Studies, vol. 4, 2013, p. 114. Wade quotes J. Allen Mitchell identifying a growing reading public conditioned to read for the moral in the fifteenth century.

<sup>32</sup> Murray J. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

stylistic, thematic and cultural traits of medieval romance while allowing for a few challenging, if not intriguing, cracks in the narrative as well as breaks in the metre, namely the tail-line or “fault-line” in the twelve-line tail-rhyme stanza.

If the brisk pace of the story participates to *le plaisir du texte*, the apparent fissures in the surface of the poem actually derive from the elliptical form of metrical romance which, in Derek Pearsall’s words, is little articulated and gives the description of successive events an expeditious quality with hardly any transitions<sup>33</sup>. However, the reader is able to fill the logical gaps, to figure out the cause and effect links despite the condensed telling. The dramatic faultlines and metrical breaks do not compromise the effectiveness of the dynamic plot of *The Erle of Tolous*. *Failles* aptly provides a relevant metaphoric lens through which to crack, tentatively so, the code of a Middle English romance concerned with the right thing and containing occasional clefts and rents which, at the end of the day, may be holds that help to get a better grasp of the poem’s elaborate texture and subtly interrelated meanings.

---

<sup>33</sup> Derek Pearsall, “The Pleasure of Popular Romance: A Prefatory Essay”, in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson, eds. *Medieval Insular Romance. Translation and Innovation*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, [1997] 2000, p. 13.

