UNMOORED INTERPRETATIONS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF (MIS)READING IN EMARÉ

by

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Abstract

This project examines how one fourteenth-century popular romance, *Emaré*, responds to contemporary concerns about interpretation and misreading through a close analysis of how correct and incorrect textual interpretation and its consequences are portrayed within the text. I am most interested in how the reading environment and reading practices of the fourteenth century, most especially the rapid increase in lay literacy and the inclusion of women in romance readership, turned popular romance in particular into a locus for concerns about (in)correct interpretation, and in the effect of these concerns on the romance texts themselves. How did romance writers respond to the charges being laid against their texts by contemporary critics? To what extent did they attempt to direct their readers' interpretation of these texts and prevent misreading? And how did the gender of both reader and writer affect how the text was perceived and utilized?

In order to address these questions, I have performed close, historicized readings of three key episodes in *Emaré*: the Emperor’s misreading of Emaré’s wondrous robe, a female-authored text that makes use of a particularly feminine mode of production and is not easily readable by men such as the Emperor; Emaré’s mother-in-law’s deliberate misreading of her son’s letters; and Emaré’s final use of her son—a jointly-authored text produced by herself and her husband—to facilitate both understanding and reconciliation between herself and the two men most heavily implicated in the earlier episodes of misreading. By examining these moments within the broader context of cultural fears around the rise of female literacy and the popularity of vernacular romance, I have mapped how one such work presents a rehabilitative model of female and lay literacy.
Emaré demonstrates, via the exemplary format favoured by texts of its genre, the dangers posed by disunity among female writers and male readers, and male writers and female readers, and the power that lies in an approach to reading that acknowledges both gendered lenses, and ultimately provides the sole means of correct interpretation and the moral redemption that comes with it.
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Introduction: Lay readers, redeing, and those pesky romances

During an early episode in the fourteenth-century popular romance *Emaré*, the heroine’s father, the Emperor Artyus, is presented with a beautiful embroidered cloth by one of his vassals. The robe is a valuable prize won from the Sultan of Babylon, but it is also a visual text that presents the romance story of its author, the Sultan’s daughter. Artyus’ first encounter with the robe is encapsulated in the two lines: *The Emperour lokede therupon / And myght hyt not se.*¹ Though Artyus’ blindness is attributed to the glittering of the stones that adorn the robe and dazzle his eyes, it points to the interpretive problem that lies at the core of the poem. The Emperor’s failure to truly see the cloth is a failure to rede it correctly, and his misinterpretation leads him to attempt to marry his own daughter and then exile her when she refuses, setting into motion the near-catastrophic events of the story. Were it not for a redemptive act of correct interpretation at the poem’s close that allows for Artyus’ rehabilitation and the reunion of his sundered family, *Emaré* would be a tragedy of the loss that misreading and misdirected desire can bring. Instead, it serves as an example of the power of reading to both lead people into grave error and allow for the redemption of even great sinners. The ways in which gender factors into these moments only serves to heighten its resonance: Artyus is bewildered by a text authored by a woman, and succeeds in reading another that his own daughter has produced at the close of the narrative, pointing to the ambiguous power of female influence on the interpretation of important texts. *Emaré*’s engagement with the double-edged nature and powerful influence of reading situates it within a broader cultural discourse about lay readership in the later Middle Ages, and serves as a response to

medieval fears about the dangers of misreading and the increasing presence of female readers and interpreters of vernacular literature.

In a chapter of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* subtitled ‘Christians should not talk nonsense to unbelievers’, St. Augustine discusses the dangers of incorrect scriptural exegesis.² Having cautioned Biblical scholars to ensure that their interpretation of the events of Genesis is consistent with the common scientific understanding of the world, he writes:

> Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend the utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof […] although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertions.³

To Augustine, misreading of scripture, especially that stemming from a lack of true understanding, jeopardizes the progress of the Christian faith and the authority of the Bible. His concerns about misreading led him to develop his own models of exegesis, both literal and metaphorical, which he employed in his readings of *Genesis*, the Psalms and the Pauline epistles. He further discussed his concerns about interpretation and reception of both written and spoken texts in works such as *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (on the teaching of the catechism) and *De Doctrina Christiana* (a more general discussion of reading and exegesis, as well as preaching), placing considerable emphasis

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³ Augustine, 42-43, section 39.
on authority and the particular challenges posed by an unlearned audience. Augustine’s literary theory and concerns about misreading were highly influential throughout the medieval period, and, along with the works of Jerome and Origen, formed the foundation of the interpretive strategies developed by late-medieval scholastics.

By the thirteenth century, scholars had developed an extensive critical vocabulary and set of glossing practices to aid with correct exegesis, and were beginning to apply this theoretical apparatus to texts other than scripture, most prominently the works of great pagan authors such as Ovid and Virgil. Their primary tool was the academic prologue, which laid out the identity of a text’s author, his material, his style and structure and his objective in writing. This frame drew on the Aristotelian ‘four causes’ that were thought to govern all activity in the universe: the motivating agent or ‘efficient cause’ (the author), the ‘material cause’ (medium used to produce the text), ‘formal cause’ (literary form) and ‘final cause’ (objective). Of these, the ‘efficient cause’ and ‘final cause’ were of greatest importance, as they addressed two central issues of late medieval literary theory: auctoritas and utilitas. Auctoritas was the degree of authority and veracity ascribed to the works of an auctor, a designation Alastair Minnis adroitly describes as ‘an accolade bestowed upon a popular writer by those later scholars and

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5 Stock 2.


writers who used extracts from his works as sententious statements […] gave lectures on his works in the form of textual commentaries, or employed them as literary models.\textsuperscript{10} 

\textit{Utilitas} was the more straightforward measure of a work’s moral value and didactic function, most famously encapsulated in Horace’s notion in the \textit{Ars poetica} that poetry ought to furnish the reader with both pleasure and profit.\textsuperscript{11} An authoritative text possessed of \textit{utilitas}, then, was best suited for profitable interpretation, so long as it was being read by a trained audience; however, as Augustine’s complaint makes clear, even the most authoritative and morally useful text of all—holy scripture—could be misread if left in the wrong hands.

Of course, a text of more dubious \textit{utilitas} and \textit{auctoritas} poses an even more urgent danger. By the fourteenth century, increased literacy and an increasing reliance on written documents meant that growing numbers of texts of all varieties were available for misreading by a growing mass of untrained readers.\textsuperscript{12} Of these, one of the more common targets of scholarly and clerical concerns about misreading was romance. As Melissa Furrow puts it, ‘romance, because it [was] the most prestigious of the secular genres in a culture largely—but far from completely—dedicated to the spiritual, [became] the inevitable jousting ground for medieval ideas about literary value and meaning.’\textsuperscript{13} Aside from its secular focus—which was shared with other genres, such as the \textit{fabliaux}—romance was also regarded with suspicion for its lack of clear religious \textit{utilitas}. Any

\textsuperscript{10} Minnis, \textit{Theory}, 10.


legitimization via *auctoritas*, on the other hand, was complicated by the dearth of identifiable authors in the romance tradition and the tendency of their texts to be translations and transcriptions of earlier, equally anonymous narratives. The arbitrariness of the *auctor* designation did, however, leave room for vernacular writers of the period to attempt to lay claim to this status, though this was a fraught process with no guarantee of success. One such vexed attempt is Geoffrey Chaucer’s dream vision The *House of Fame*, in which the narrator vacillates between faithfully recounting Virgil and Ovid’s accounts of the story of Aeneas and Dido and aggressively asserting his own role as the *auctor* of this particular version of the story. On the one hand, he famously lays claim to his own vision above all others in introducing Dido’s complaint with the words:

In suche worde gan to pleyne  
Dydo of hir grete peyne,  
As me mette redely –  
Non other auctor alegge I.  

*(Chaucer, House of Fame, 311-14)*

On the other hand, this is undermined, or at least complicated, almost immediately by his direction of readers who wish to hear the entirety of her words to *Rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde*, as he has no intent of completing his account.\(^\text{14}\) Such a rapid return to directly referencing established *auctores* can be seen as a retreat behind the authority of others, and a stepping away from his own assertion of authorial power. However, the way in which Chaucer’s narrator suggests Virgil and Ovid’s works as suitable continuations of his own unique account has a leveling effect that grants his writing a similar level of authority—as if Virgil, Ovid and the Chaucer-narrator were interchangeable reliable accounts of the same story. His engagement with the problem of

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authority in relation to the dream narrative form of *House of Fame* is similarly tentative: he begins the poem with a summary of authoritative views of dream interpretation, most of which rejected the value of dreams with human, rather than divine, origins, before repeatedly asserting himself as the author of this account of a dream more wonderful than any man has previously experienced.\(^{15}\) While modern identifications of Chaucer as the ‘father of English poetry’ and other honorifics as arbitrary as the medieval *auctor* point to the success of his attempt at self-assertion, the rarity of such a designation for a medieval writer and the degree to which Chaucer doubts his role and wrestles with is highlight just how difficult such a claim would be to make. With *auctoritas* an uncertain ground—at best—on which to build a case for a romance’s value, most writers were left with little choice but to make as strong an argument as possible from *utilitas*. Such a case first required writers to harness the genre’s exemplary mode as a means of moral education, which of course meant ensuring that the examples presented had to be interpreted correctly.

The dangers of the misinterpretation of even overtly moralistic romances were so apparent as to be taken up by literary writers such as Dante, who used an episode of his *Inferno* to show how a misreading of the prose *Lancelot* led to the eternal damnation of lovers Paolo and Francesca.\(^{16}\) Francesca’s misinterpretation of the romance’s content has been variously interpreted as a case of accidental misunderstanding and a conscious


misrepresentation of what she has read.¹⁷ Misreading, then, can be careless and born of ignorance or deliberate and malevolent. Jean Molinet makes similar observations in his defense of Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*,¹⁸ vigorously attacking fifteenth-century misreaders of de Meun and referring to them all as *malebouches*, but distinguishes between ‘experienced, primarily male readers, motivated by lust, and inexperienced, and consequently “innocent”, mostly female readers.’¹⁹ Experience thus protects one from accidental misreading, but can facilitate deliberate misreading. The gendered distinction that Molinet makes, on the other hand, is suggestive of medieval anxieties about a predominantly female readership of romance that had not undergone training in exegesis, and might therefore lack the necessary critical apparatus to read correctly.²⁰

Romance writers who were concerned about the misreading of their own works were thus faced with a problem. Though they could attempt to direct their audience towards the scholarly model of interpretation, they would have no guarantee that all of their readers would have the training to make proper use of an academic prologue or similar apparatus. Furthermore, the clerical commentary tradition that had produced this theory was wedded to a moralistic interpretation of literature that condemned heterosexual love—the central subject matter of many romances—as a dangerous

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¹⁷ Noakes 225.

¹⁸ De Meun’s work is the *Roman de la Rose moralisé*.


²⁰ Noakes 223.
vanity. This distaste for the material of romance made it difficult to establish the *utilitas* of romance texts, and so made them more likely to be subject to moral criticism and further muddled the project of interpretation: even if the reader was able to apply contemporary literary theory to their text, what moral instruction could they hope to gain from it? In response to this problem, some defenders of romance argued that these texts’ *utilitas* lay in their exemplary function: they provided models of good and bad behaviour, in much the same manner as the *exempla* used in sermons could warn against sin while portraying even the most vile behaviour. This understanding of the interpretive value of romance, while the most plausible, still required that the reader be able to clearly distinguish between the behaviours they ought to emulate, and those they ought to abhor. Unlike clerical *exempla* or the *fabliaux*—another secular genre that provided instruction through example, but presented only negative behaviours for mockery and censure—romances mixed positive and negative models of behaviour, and did not necessarily provide clear guidelines as to which was which. How, for example, ought one to read the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guenevere, which inspired both deeds of great martial valour and carnal sins?

In order to ensure that the exemplary mode of the romance did both delight and teach, romance writers had to provide not only examples of behaviours to be interpreted in a moral context, but also models of correct reading (or incorrect reading) in a way that inspired correct interpretation of its main story. After all, it was highly unlikely that all of

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22 Furrow 42, 218.

23 Furrow 218.
a romance’s readers and listeners would have been trained in exegesis, and so a morally effective romance would have to show its audience how it ought to be read. Before examining how a model of lay interpretation might be transmitted via the romance form, it is important to lay out—even roughly—what such a model might look like. While Augustine and Molinet’s concerns about the capabilities of their audiences shed some light on the potential complications involved in developing one model of effective reading, the definition of the Middle English term for the act itself, reden, points to its greater complexity. The verb reden means at once ‘to engage in reading a book’, ‘to perceive’ or ‘to interpret’, and even ‘to tell a story’ and ‘to counsel/advise.’ A good redor, then, must do a great deal more than just correctly deduce the contents of a text.

Augustine and Dante’s negative examples provide some guidance as to what this ‘more’ entails, suggesting that a good reader must be careful to avoid having their interpretation conflict with existing evidence, and must report what they have read truthfully. This is far from a complete theory of reading, however, and a close look at yet another fourteenth-century text, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, helps to flesh it out. Victoria Warren links Troilus’ failure ‘as a lover and a person’ to his inability to correctly read the ‘text’ of Criseyde, and his mistaken assumption of the role of author by writing his own version of Criseyde and designating this self-produced text the object of his affection. Troilus is at once a passively incompetent and an actively manipulative misreader. In order to illuminate how exactly Troilus fails, Warren turns to Michel

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24 ‘Reden’, *Middle English Dictionary*, 2001, University of Michigan, 2 February 2011 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=157165869&egdisplay=compact&egs=157269689>. The full range of meanings also includes ‘to teach/instruct’ and ‘to guide’ (to a place or state).

Foucault’s seminal ‘What is an Author?’ and its assertion that a text must foremost be interpreted with an eye to its context and, particularly, the ‘social relationships’ that define it.26 My own understanding of redeing will likewise make use of Foucault’s emphasis on context, but expand it beyond Warren’s focus on social relationships to include the many “modes of being” that Foucault delineates in the following key set of questions:

Where has [this discourse] been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions?27

To rede correctly, then, one must take into account not only the content of a text, but also the social relationships in which it participates, the context of its production and the ways in which it has been altered or interpreted and incorporated into new discourses. Furthermore, the act of redeing extends beyond understanding to the appropriate manipulation of and engagement with the text as it continues to circulate. A successful reader might therefore also be referred to as a textual ‘operator’ who maneuvers a text through a particular social context (by controlling who reads it and even how it is read, either by manipulating the physical text or its contents/message) in order to achieve a set objective (anything from delighting and instructing its audience to sealing a marriage contract or political agreement).

In this project, I will consider how redeing and misreading are modeled in the late fourteenth century Middle English popular romance Emaré. This text directly addresses

26 Though her usage is a truncation of Foucault’s rather expansive conception of context, the emphasis on social relationships works well for Warren’s chosen text, as social relationships are key to any ‘textual’ reading of Criseyde, whose position as a widow, and woman more generally, is crucial to an understanding of her actions and character (Warren 1).

27 Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ in Josué V. Harari (ed. and trans.), Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) 160. Omitted from opening of quote: ‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse?’
problems of textual interpretation, as well as taking a particular interest in the role of female readers and writers in the interpretive process. Furthermore, *Emaré* maps the processes of interpretation and transmission across a variety of commonly-interpreted medieval texts (embroidered cloth, letter, and human body) and their receptions by diverse audiences of both genders, allowing me to explore the breadth, depth and variety of romance’s engagement with, and responses to, the problems associated with the medieval act of reading. I am particularly interested in how *Emaré* portrays female readers whose mastery of their chosen texts moves beyond literacy and even redeing and allows them to behave as textual operators and consciously manipulate less proficient male readers. While my discussion of this text will not in any way constitute a comprehensive survey of anxieties about readership in late-medieval romance, I hope to gain a stronger sense of how Middle English romance was shaped by concerns about misreading, and so to develop a clearer understanding of the complex interplay of reception and influence between the writers, critics and audience of late medieval secular literature.
Reading *Emaré*

The Middle English romance *Emaré* tells the story of its titular heroine’s repeated exiles and separations from her family, all of which are the result of either accidental or deliberate misreading. The poem begins with her father, Emperor Artyus’, receipt of a beautiful embroidered cloth from his subordinate Tergaunte. After a long episode that details both the contents and design of the robe and Artyus’ somewhat baffled response to it, the Emperor turns his attention to his daughter, and decides that he wishes to marry her. The close proximity of the two moments in the text and Artyus’ decision to have the cloth made into a robe for his incestuous bride-to-be to wear suggest that the Emperor’s encounter with the cloth is somehow implicated in his newfound illicit desire. Despite his considerable power over her, Emaré refuses her father, and is cast out to sea in a rudderless boat as punishment for her obstinacy. She survives her sea voyage and washes up on the coast of Galys, where she is found and taken in by the kindly Syr Kadore. After she has served him for some time, teaching his daughters how to weave and otherwise admirably performing her feminine duties, Kadore decides to present her to his lord, the King of Galys, as an example of perfect womanhood. The King immediately falls in love with Emaré and takes her as his wife, and all is well for the young couple until she becomes pregnant with their first child. Emaré gives birth while her husband is away, and her jealous mother-in-law intercepts and manipulates the letters that pass between Kadore and the King telling of the happy event, and makes the King believe that his child is a deformed monster. When he responds to the tragedy with mercy, she forges another letter, ordering Kadore to cast mother and child into the sea once again as a remedy for the monstrous birth. Emaré again endures a perilous voyage and is this time cast ashore in
Rome, where she chooses to stay and raise her son, Segremour. During a visit to the city years later, the King of Galys is successfully intercepted by Segremour and reconciles with his estranged wife. At the same time, her aged father decides to travel to Rome to do penance for the crimes he has committed against his daughter. Emaré has her son find him and bring him to her, finally reuniting the sundered family.

On the surface, *Emaré* is a variant of the ‘Constance-saga’—a folktale-like narrative that features the exile of an innocent woman by her father, accusations of a monstrous (or at least deviant) birth, and her eventual wedding to a fitting suitor in another land—of which the best known variant is probably Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale.* Because of this categorization, most clearly articulated in Margaret Schlauch’s *Chaucer’s Constance and Accused Queens* (1927), the romance has frequently been discussed by critics as a simple analogue of, or precursor to, Chaucer’s text. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. (1983), goes so far as identify it as a direct influence on the more famous work, but does not discuss the romance at all outside the context of a lineage of transmission. Katherine Inglis takes a similar approach in ‘Costanza, Constance, Custance and Emaré: Romola's Medieval Ancestry’ (2006), focusing on *Emaré* as an inspiration for George Eliot’s historical writing.

Critical works that do address the structure, themes and reception of *Emaré* generally fall into two categories: feminist writings concerned with its representation of a

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28 For a detailed discussion of the common features of the *Man of Law's Tale* and its analogues, including *Emaré*, see Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York: New York University Press, 1927).


female heroine (a rare occurrence in romance), and works interested in the role and meaning of the wondrous cloth that occupies an important and nebulous place within the narrative. Marijane Osborn takes a unique approach to reading *Emaré* as a female-centric text in *Romancing the Goddess* (1998).\(^{31}\) She presents modern verse translations of *Emaré*, the *Man of Law’s Tale* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* side-by-side and then uses them to explore the iconography of the sea-bound “Goddess” figure and her significance to Ancient, Medieval and Modern culture. Because of its broad scope and extra-textual interests, Osborn’s work does not devote much space to in-depth analysis of *Emaré* in particular. More focused studies include Anne Laskaya’s ‘The Rhetoric of Incest in the Middle English *Emaré*’ (1998), an analysis of how the romance perpetuates and reconfirms patriarchal power structures through its representation of its female heroine;\(^{32}\) and Gail Ashton’s ‘Her Father’s Daughter’ (2000), which concerns itself with the ways in which incest and marriage transform father-daughter relationships in *Emaré*, the *Man of Law’s Tale*, and Gower’s *Tale of Constance*.\(^{33}\)

The first focused study of the role of the cloth in *Emaré* is Mortimer J. Donovan’s ‘Middle English *Emaré* and the Cloth Worthily Wrought’ (1974), which does little more than draw attention to the prominence of the object within the narrative and identify it

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(somewhat tepidly) as a dramatic device that ‘should indeed be mentioned’.\textsuperscript{34} Later writers have indeed mentioned the cloth, to the point where studies of its symbolic and structural meaning greatly outnumber other writings on the romance. Of particular interest to this project are Elizabeth Scala’s ‘The Texture of Emare’ (2006), which provides a historicized reading of the cloth’s role as an emblem for mercantile production and consumption of goods, such as books and embroidery, that are at once luxury and textual objects;\textsuperscript{35} Ross G. Arthur’s ‘Emaré’s Cloak and Audience Response’ (1989), which reads the function of the cloth through Augustine’s understanding of signification as it is presented in \textit{De doctrina Christiana};\textsuperscript{36} and Amanda Hopkins’ ‘Veiling the Text: The True Role of the Cloth in Emaré’ (2000), which provides a useful summary of previous writings on the function of the cloth, and argues for a reading of it as a mundane (rather than supernatural) object that obscures and confuses the actual motivations and virtues of the text’s characters, clouding the romance’s true nature and unnecessarily distracting its interpreters.\textsuperscript{37}

In my own study of the romance, I would like to draw on Arthur and Hopkins’ approaches to the cloth as an object that is read by a particular audience, with a diverse


set of responses being generated. I will follow Arthur in drawing from Augustine’s conception of interpretation and reception, but will consider the question of reading more generally, rather than focusing only on the interpretation of written text. I will also be including an analysis of the effects of gender, but without the focused lens of feminist analysis provided by Laskaya and Osborn. Instead, I will examine how the inclusion of women in the text’s audience affects the ways in which reading is presented within it, taking a historicized approach that is in some ways similar to the one taken by Scala. My focus on the trope of reading has its genesis in the observation that Emaré is a text about the interpretation of texts: its narrative tension is produced by two consecutive episodes of misreading (of Emaré’s wondrous cloth and her husband’s letters), and its final resolution is effected by a moment of carefully-planned correct reading (of the true nature of Emaré’s son). Furthermore, It is notable that its female protagonist and her malevolent mother-in-law play key roles in these processes of interpretation, raising the common medieval spectre of the dangerous fallibility of female reading. It thus provides an excellent avenue for exploring the particular problems posed by gender to any interpretive project, and illuminates the way that a text’s reception can be dramatically affected by the gender of both its author and its reader.
Woven romance and its tangled consequences

The centrality of gendered reading to Emaré is perhaps best illustrated by the poet’s insertion of a wondrous embroidered cloth into the text, which is unique to this version of the Constance narrative and which becomes the first object of disastrous misreading within the romance. Its strangeness and prominence within the story invite interpretation from the reader as well as by the characters in the romance itself, while at the same time making correct interpretation difficult. While Hopkins has provided an excellent overview of the many ways in which the cloth has tripped up modern critics, I wish to examine its effects on two of the romance’s internal readers: the Emperor, Artyus, and his subordinate Tergaunte. In ‘The Texture of Emaré’, Scala argues convincingly that the cloth is not only a rich commodity and love-token, but also acts as a narrative object: a ‘romance miscellany’. The three pairs of famous lovers that are woven into it—Ydoine and Amadas, Trystram and Isolde, and Floris and Blancheflour—are all drawn from written romances, some of which appear in significant miscellanies such as the Auchinleck manuscript. The Emir’s daughter’s inclusion of herself and the

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38 Though Emaré survives in only one manuscript version (MS Cotton Caligula A ii), numerous editions of it have been in use since Edith Rickert’s seminal 1906 edition for the Early English Text Society. I have chosen to work from Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury’s Middle English Breton Lays (part of the TEAMS series), as it is the most recent and most accessible version, and deviates little from earlier authoritative editions. Any references to other editions will be identified as such.

39 Scala 227.

40 ‘Ydone and Amadas’ are referred to in the contemporaneous Sir Degrevant and are the protagonists of the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman Amadas et Ydoine; ‘Trystram and Isowde’ are the stars of multiple romances, including Gottfried von Strasbourg’s Tristram and the Sir Tristram that appears in the Auchinleck manuscript; and ‘Florys and Dam Blawncheflour’ appear in another Auchinleck romance, Floris and Blancheflour, and the Old French Floire et Blancheflor.

41 Laskaya and Salisbury n. 122, 134, and 146. Scala points out that two of these texts appear together in the Auchinleck manuscript, itself a miscellany, and argues that the collection of these particular romances would have hinted at such a compilation (though not likely the Auchinleck itself). Though she here
Sultan of Babylon’s son on the cloth’s fourth corner implicitly frames their own love story as one worthy of being written about in romance, as well as giving it some of the resonances of the earlier tales, all of which tell of lovers separated by great obstacles. Trystram and Isolde’s love is adulterous, and ultimately leads them to a tragic end; Ydoine and Amadas are separated by rank, but ultimately manage to marry; and Floris and Blancheflour are initially separated by both rank and religion (Floris is a Saracen and Blancheflour a Christian), but likewise find a happy ending in marriage. An intertextual reading of the figures woven into the cloth thus suggests that the Emir’s daughter’s own story, while not necessarily tragic, is complicated by social barriers that render her love transgressive in some way. At the same time, the happy endings of two of the presented romances provide hope for a similar outcome for its creator and her lover. The cloth is thus first of all an inter-textual celebration of romantic love that makes explicit reference to literary culture and seeks to embed its ‘author’ within that culture as both a writer and protagonist.

Making use of an appropriately gendered form of representation, the Emir’s daughter weaves her romance instead of writing it. The image of a woman weaving her own story would likely have evoked the classical story of Philomela for a late medieval audience. That the story was fairly widely known at the time is suggested by its inclusion in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, written not long after *Emaré*. The parallels between the Sultan’s daughter and Philomela, who was raped and then rendered mute by misidentifies *Sir Amadace* as the source of the Amadas story, the mention of Amadas within *Sir Degrevant*, which is itself collected within another miscellany, does strengthen her point. See further Scala n. 17.

42 The suggestion that the cloth presents, or even champions, transgressive love is made by Tsai in ‘Emaré’s Fabulous Robe’, though she uses it to attribute a supernatural malice to the cloth and its Saracen giver, Tergaunte, claiming that it deliberately corrupts the Emperor into breaking the incest taboo.
the King of Thrace and eventually identified her attacker by weaving an account of the event into a tapestry (or, in some versions, a robe), begin and end at their chosen mode of communication. The invocation of this tragic figure does, however, serve as a reminder that woven works could operate as texts, and were meant to be not just viewed, but read. Chaucer’s version of the tale, for example, strongly emphasizes the literate nature of Philomela’s act, describing how:

She coude eek rede and wel ynow endyte,
   But with a penne coude she nat wryte.
But letters can she weve to and fro,
   So that, by that yer was al ago,
She hadde ywoven in a stamyn large
   How she was brought from Athenes in a barge,
Nad al the thing that Tereus hath wrought,
   She waf it wel, and wrot the storye above,
   How she was served for hire syster
(Chaucer, Legend of Good Women, 2356-65)

Philomela’s literacy is framed as being tied intrinsically to the act of weaving; she can read and can write, but can only do so in fabric, and not with a pen on paper. The implication here is that weaving is a legitimate form of textual production that is specific—or at least most appropriate—to women. This notion that weaving is a female-specific craft is further emphasized by Emaré’s continued focus on its protagonist’s own skill. This begins with her education by Abro, who *thawght hyt curtesye and thewe, / Golde and sylke for to sewe, / Amonge maydenes moo*.43 Sewing is a craft particularly fitted to a maiden such as Emaré—a view that is later reinforced by Syr Kadore when he praises her before the king for having taught his children *how to sere and marke / All

43 *Emaré* 58-60.
In this text, then, sewing and weaving constitute a discrete feminine mode of communication.

Non-oral communication in Emaré takes two forms: written letters and embroidered cloth. The former is rightfully the province of men, and the king’s mother’s use of letters is a disruption of their normal movement between the king and his steward Kadore with the aid of male messengers. The latter, on the other hand, is solely allowed to women. The cloth’s second significant ‘mode of being’ is thus its existence as a female-authored text that exists alongside, but separate from, the masculine texts within this romance. If one considers that romances were already a ‘feminized’ genre of literature, than the reproduction of romance texts by way of a feminine mode of expression is at once wholly appropriate, and a means of rendering this type of text even more characteristically feminine. In fact, if one looks at the cloth in terms of the Aristotelian four causes, it is apparent that it is an almost entirely feminine text: its ‘efficient cause’ is a woman, the Emir’s daughter, while its ‘material cause’ is cloth and thread—a woman’s materials. Its ‘formal cause’ is a bit more complex, but is likewise defined by female-dominated modes of communication. The woven story is closely linked to female creators by its associations with the Philomela legend and Emaré’s own emphasis on weaving as a feminine art. Furthermore, the genre being represented is romance, which was frequently directed towards a female audience. With these three

44 Emaré 376-77.

45 Emaré 508-603.

46 Though the products of Emaré’s weaving are never described in as much detail, it is reasonable to conclude that they would have contained similar visual language—if not similar content—to the cloth.

47 Joyce Coleman, for example, discusses the role of public romance reading (prelection) as a means of self-display for young women, while both sides in the famed querelle de la Rose take precise aim at the
causes firmly linked to female readers and writers, all that remains is determining the effect of gender on the cloth’s ‘final cause’.

The romance’s account of the cloth’s production also draws attention to its intended use. The Emir’s daughter wove the cloth over the course of seven years for [the Sowdan sonne] sake, before presenting it to his father.\(^{48}\) It seems here to be functioning as a dowry, with the rich stones in its embroidery making the cloth a valuable gift worthy of being given to a Sultan in order to seal a marriage agreement. Sir Tergaunte even claims *So rych a jwell ys ther non / In all Crystyanté*, emphasizing its material value above any other wondrous quality it may have.\(^{49}\) As Scala suggests, the initial function of the cloth is as a gift with which ‘to contract engagements and forge new relations.’\(^{50}\) It likewise operates in such a fashion when it is presented to Emperor Artyus, by his subordinate, the knight Sir Tergaunte. At the very least, the gift is a marker of Tergaunte’s filial and feudal loyalty to Artyus; he is presenting him with a valuable spoil of war, either as a part of his feudal obligation, or as a means of ensuring his continued role as a political ally.\(^{51}\) Scala pushes this reading even further, suggesting that Tergaunte

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\(^{48}\) *Emaré* 109-20, 159-70. There seems to be some debate over who the original recipient of the cloth is, as both Laskaya and Salisbury and Scala declare that it is given to the son, possibly following the gloss in Rickert (Edith Rickert, *The Romance of Emaré*, Early English Text Society ES XCIX (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1908 [for 1906]) 6.). The romance states, *When the cloth to ende was wrowght, / To the Sowndan sone hyt was browght*, (with sone being glossed by Salisbury and Laskaya as ‘soon’, not ‘son’) which seems to identify her lover’s father as the actual recipient of the gift. The fact that Tergaunte’s father has won the cloth from the Sultan himself further supports this reading (Laskaya and Salisbury 149, Scala 229, *Emaré* 169-70).

\(^{49}\) *Emaré* 107-8.

\(^{50}\) Scala 227. It may be useful to think about it as working in a similar way to the tokens used in medieval trothplight ceremonies, but retaining a value that would make it an appropriate token to be exchanged among royalty. For a detailed discussion of tokens and their place in medieval law see Firth Green 50-7.

\(^{51}\) *Emaré* 79-89, 176-80.
is duplicating the dowry function of the cloth and giving it to Artyus ‘in implicit
echange for Emaré’, writing himself as another ‘archetypal lover’ in the process.\textsuperscript{52}
Emaré’s cloth is therefore simultaneously a multi-textual account of romantic lovers, the
product of feminine craft and language and a valuable marriage token. Its ‘final cause’,
therefore, appears to change depending on whether one views it as a text, or as a \textit{ryche}
\textit{jwell}. This complexity of function can be further illuminated by a return to Foucault’s
idea of a text’s modes of being, or the ways in which it participates in a variety of
discourses that are heavily dependent on context, and especially on the identity of the
reader/operator of the text. One of the modes in which the cloth operates is truly textual,
and is entirely female-dominated: it is a romance miscellany ‘written’ in a language that
can be read even by the illiterate (in the modern sense) that appends popular fictional
tales of love to a real-world romantic engagement.\textsuperscript{53} Its author is also its operator, and she
passes the text on to her future father-in-law as a literary testament to the young couple’s
love that can be read in the context of the other love stories with which it engages. Its
other mode, which it takes on in the realm of powerful men, is as a valuable commodity.
In much the same way that merchants of limited literacy and other members of the rising
middle classes would purchase and display books as markers of wealth and status,\textsuperscript{54} the
Emir, Tergaunte and Arytus recognize and utilize the material value of the cloth without

\textsuperscript{52} Scala 232.

\textsuperscript{53} Or, at least, ‘real’ within the textual world of the poem, which does seem to recognize the
archetypal/fictional qualities of the other romance heroes it mentions, even as it produces a new such
pairing.

\textsuperscript{54} Though many members of the mercantile class would possess only what Coleman refers to as pragmatic
literacy—the ability to read just enough to determine the meaning of a business letter or other document
essential to their work written in the vernacular—and not enough knowledge to read more elaborate
literature or Latin works, the level of illumination and artistry involved in producing both vernacular
manuscripts and Latin prayer books for these audiences points to their appreciation for books as valuable
material objects that could be admired and displayed even if they were not understood (Coleman 88-9).
ever engaging with its textual nature or function. One might wonder if they even recognize that it has one.

It should not, perhaps, be surprising that the Emperor fails to interpret the cloth correctly—that is, to read it as a text. His *redeing* is first of all hampered by his inability to even perceive the content of the cloth. His initial response to its unfurling emphasizes just how little he sees:

The Emperour lokede therupone
And myght hyt not se,
For glysteryng of the ryche ston:
Redy syght had he non,
And sayde, “How may thys be?”
The Emperour sayde on high,
“How may thys be?”
Sertes, thyss ys a fayry,
Or ellys a vanyté!”

*(Emaré 98-105)*

He is quite literally blinded by the value of the cloth and can see only the *ryche ston* that form the component parts of the images upon it, not the images themselves, limiting his perception of the cloth to that of a valuable, but not explicitly textual, commodity. His conclusion that it is either a magical item or an illusion prompts a lengthy account of its earthly and material origins. Who exactly the audience of this 70-line account is, however, is in question, which further complicates the matter of just how much the Emperor understands. Common editorial practice has been to attribute only the very opening and conclusion of the text to Tergaunte, while the bulk of the account—including the full description of the figures embroidered upon it—is given by the narrator. It may well be that all the Emperor hears is the following:

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55 Laskaya and Salisbury (eds.) *(Emaré 107-8, 172-7)* follow Maldwyn Mills (ed.) *(Emaré, Six Middle English Romances* (London: Dent, 1973) 107-8, 172-7), Thomas C. Rumble (ed.) *(Emaré, The Breton Lays in Middle English* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965) 107-8, 172-7), and Rickert (ed.) (107-8, 172-7) in marking off only the opening and closing lines with quotation marks, leaving the rest of the
If this is indeed the case, then his ignorance of the cloth-text’s subject matter is never corrected. If, on the other hand, he does hear the full description—a possibility, as the quotation marks that section it off from Tergaunte’s words are a modern editorial insertion, and the tone of the passage allows it to integrate neatly with the pieces cited above—then he may be distracted by its intense emphasis on the jewels that adorn the cloth over what it depicts. The identification of Ydoyne and Amadas is immediately followed by line upon line of vivid description of how they are adorned:

Portrayed they wer with trewe-love-flour,  
Of stones bright of hewe:  
Wyth carbunkull and safere,  
Kassydonys and onyx so clere  
Sette in golde newe,  
Deamondes and rubyes  
And othur stones of mychyll pryse  

(Emaré 125-31)

Trystram and Isowde so bryght are literally and figuratively buried:

description to the omniscient narrative voice. None of these editors provide an explanation for this choice in their notes.

56 There is no dramatic shift in style or tone between the text marked off by quotation marks and the rest of the passage that would immediately indicate a change in speaker—in fact, the entire piece could easily be attributed to Tergaunte. One possible reason for the division is the very materiality of the description: although it discusses the origin of the cloth in a small amount of detail, its focus is on the shape and appearance of the cloth itself, which Artyus has laid out in front of him and can presumably see for himself. In such a case, the description might well be for the benefit of the audience. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that the cloth’s sheer beauty ‘blinds’ the Emperor, and so potentially forces him to resort to listening to a description of its details, which he cannot pick out for himself.
As full of stones ar they dyght,
   As thykke as they may be:
Of topase and of rubyes,
And other stones of myche pryse,
   That seemly wer to se;
Wyth crapawtes and nakette,
Thykke of stones ar they sette,
   For sothe, as y say the.

(Emaré 134-44)

Florys and Blawncheflour are overwhelmed by

Emerawdes of gret virtues
   To wyte wythouten wene;
Deamoundes and koralle,
Perydotes and crystall,
   And gode garnettes bytwenne.

(Emaré 152-6)

Even the Sultan’s daughter and her lover, whose actual story is given the most space here, likely because it was the only tale entirely unknown to Emaré’s audience, are picked out in stones that wer sowght wyde. ¹⁵⁷ There is a critical tradition of reading this extensive inventory of precious stones as a lapidary, and so ascribing additional meaning and redeability to the stones themselves;¹⁵⁸ however, the emphasis on their abundance (As thykke as they may be) and material value over and above individual identity (And othur stones of mychyll pryse) throughout the passage gives it a resolutely materialistic—even mercantile—tone that directs the readers attention away from the stones as objects possessed of individual virtue and towards the immensely valuable cloth they have been drawn together to produce. The entire passage comes together to reinforce the sheer opulence of this gift laid out before the Emperor, and might have had exactly that purpose

¹⁵⁷ Emaré 166.

¹⁵⁸ For example, Laskaya and Salisbury provide extensive glosses on each stone listed in this catalogue, drawing on a variety of medieval lapidaries to tease out the full symbolic value of each decorative element. See especially notes 91-156 of their edition of the text.
if it were being recited to him at the opening of a negotiated gift exchange. Given that the Emperor is hearing this description within the context of an exchange of goods between two men, and taking into account the overabundance of valuable trinkets it points out, it is entirely possible that he would only retain the portions of the description that centered on its material richness, as these would fit with his expectations of what the cloth is and how it operates in the exchange between himself and Tergaunte. In this context, the romance figures embroidered on the cloth are simply the means for affixing valuable stones to the fabric, and have no redeable, textual meaning.

Had the Emperor seen that the cloth is a romance text, he might have understood what sort of narrative it (and he) were meant to participate in. There is no room for an aged father who has already had and lost a wife to act as a lover in its world of youthful couples. In fact, there is literally no room for more couples to fit on the cloth, as the Emir’s daughter has taken up the last available corner with her own story.\(^59\) Had Artyus been capable of redeing the stories inscribed upon the cloth, he might have seen that romantic love between a father and his daughter—in marked contrast with the love between the youthful knights and princesses displayed on the cloth—is an aberration in romantic as well as moral terms that moves far beyond the relatively minor transgressions of social status and cultural background the cloth points to.\(^60\) It is possible to explain both Artyus’ blindness and Tergaunte’s failure to explain the content of the cloth as a function of its feminine mode of storytelling. The two men have no motivation to read it as

\(^59\) A detail that should have given Tergaunte pause if he had attempted his own reading of the cloth before attempting to use it to facilitate a marriage.

\(^60\) Tales of low-born knights who win the love of higher class ladies abound in romance, while the ‘noble Saracen’ who transcends his foreignness to become a part of Christian society after falling in love with a Christian woman is a common figure in crusade romances such as *The Sultan of Babylon* and *The King of Tars*. No such positive literary examples exist for those who transgress the incest taboo.
anything but a valuable item that has been won through conquest—just like thousands of other treasures brought back from the Holy Land and other ‘exotic’ locations by victorious knights. Its language is so different from the masculine modes of communication within the romance that they are incapable of even recognizing that it is a text, and are completely unable to understand its meaning.

After falling in love with Emaré, Artyus decides to make a robe of the wondrous cloth for his daughter, and present it to her as a wedding gift. His attempt to refashion the cloak in order to use it to seal a marriage alliance suggests that he has some dim understanding of how the cloth might function within the world he inhabits. As is suggested by Foucault’s question, ‘Where has [the discourse] been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself?’ a text possesses a particular range of possible uses which it allows while it simultaneously disallows, or at least discourages, others. As it circulates through the world of the romance, the cloth is repeatedly employed to sanction romantic relationships and to facilitate marriage. As this act of sealing marriage alliances is participated in by both the female author of the text and by powerful men like Tergaunte, Artyus and the Sultan before them, this mode is one in which the roles of readers in both the masculine and feminine contexts can overlap. Thus, in using it in this fashion, the Emperor is not, at first glance, incorrect; however, the identities of the people between whom the gift is exchanged are an important component of the mode of operation of this particular love token/text that he overlooks. Because he ignores the details of its earlier uses, Artyus fails to note the types of relationships the

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61 Emaré 223-243.

62 Foucault 391. Another view is that it is the culture within which a text circulates that allows only a limited range of uses of texts of its type.
cloth sanctions and facilitates. In the first case, the cloth is given by a love-struck young woman to the father of her beloved; it passes from a social inferior to her social superior and is given with the hope that the Sultan will allow the lovers to marry. In the second case, the cloth once again passes from an inferior (here, a male vassal) to a superior, and is once again offered with an implicit request for the superior’s sanction of a desired relationship. In giving the cloth to his daughter, Artyus reverses this typical power dynamic, passing the cloth down the scale of social authority from a father possessed of near-absolute power (as both patriarch and emperor) to his subordinate daughter. Or perhaps it is the Emperor himself who subordinates himself – as a medieval courtly lover must – to the female object of his gaze? By assuming the role of supplicant, he also elevates Emaré to a position where she has the power to sanction or refuse the relationship. The scene that immediately follows this final gift exchange seems to bear the latter interpretation out. Emaré immediately refuses to consent to the union and her father takes this decision as final: though her refusal makes him *right wrothe*, he makes no attempt to convince her to change her mind, instead revenging himself on her by casting her out to sea and leaving her to die. It is as if, by attempting to re-use the cloth as a wedding gift, he has unknowingly granted Emaré the power to deny him and thus has no choice but to abide by her decision. His misunderstanding of the power relationship between the giver and recipient of the cloth is thus critical to the familial rupture that propels the story forward from this point. Artyus fails to correctly *rede* the cloth’s content or form and badly misjudges its function, and his subsequent loss of his daughter beautifully illustrates the consequences of this *misredeing.*

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63 *Emaré* 260-70.
Stolen words: the perils of letter-writing

While the cloth is the most prominently-featured textual object within Emaré, a set of more readily readable texts—the letters that pass back and forth between Kadore and Emaré’s husband—are just as crucial to both the poem’s action and its theme of misreading. In contrast with Artyus’ catastrophic lack of understanding, Emaré’s mother-in-law manipulates her son’s letters with a clear understanding of both their content and their ‘modes of being’. By their very nature, letters are more constrained in the modes in which they can operate, and be understood to operate. While they would always have been understood as textual in nature, in the same manner that books and treatises—or anything composed in a written alphabet, as opposed to embroidered or painted—would have been, the cultural functions that letters could serve in England had further narrowed by the fourteenth century. As John Taylor observes, where in earlier periods letters could ‘serve as vehicles of philosophical reflection or literary thought’ or otherwise operate in a literary as well as strictly communicative mode, ‘by [this period] the great age of medieval epistolography was over [and] the majority of letters were little more than the business communications of the established and literate section of society [that had] a practical purpose which was that of message transmission’.64 If the cause of the cloth’s misreading and Emaré’s exile from her father was that the text in question operated in two distinct modes that both needed to be understood in order to manipulate the text properly, the misreading of her husband’s letters and Emaré’s second exile is facilitated by their simplicity of mode, which makes them very easy to manipulate.

In this second episode of misreading in *Emaré*, the initial letter to Emaré’s husband, the King of Galys, from his servant, Sir Kadore, is meant to tell of the joyous occasion of his son’s (and heir’s) birth; instead, Emaré’s mother-in-law intercepts it and replaces it with a false one announcing that the child is a *fowll feltred fende*, and then sends another false letter to Kadore, calling for the banishment of both mother and son.65 The mother-in-law’s knowledge of how letters routinely circulate between her son and Kadore—by way of an easily-misled messenger—allows her to intercept their correspondence with ease. Once she has done so, all that is required for her plan to succeed is the production of sufficiently convincing false letters to send in their place; Emaré, Kadore and the King’s trust in the authority of the written word, combined with the singular purpose that the letters are meant to serve, will accomplish the rest.

In *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, Richard Firth Green speaks of the ‘fetishization of documents in the fourteenth century.’66 Though he begins with an account of the use of written documents as magical talismans by illiterate people who had little (if any) prior contact with written texts, Firth Green goes on to argue that the conflation of writing with power and authority extended to literate, educated people, and had its roots in a far broader range of sources than just the ‘technological novelty’ of writing.67 Firth Green’s focus on contracts and the legal realm leads him to point to the replacement of oath-sealing tokens such as rings (especially wedding bands), swords (in knighting ceremonies and other declarations of martial loyalty) and rods or staffs (often a component of ceremonies transferring control of real

65 *Emaré* 508-629.

66 Firth Green 256.

67 Firth Green 251-57.
estate) with written documents. Because written contracts, like their non-textual predecessors in trothplights and similar rituals, had to be exchanged and retained by parties entering into an agreement, they frequently retained the material significance of tokens—as ‘semantic vehicles’ of the agreement itself—even though it was their content, and not their form, that theoretically gave the agreement its legal standing.\textsuperscript{68} This association operates similarly to the symbolic value of sacred texts, which were recognized as vehicles of divine and earthly power well before literacy became widespread, embodied by such objects as oathbooks, which not only made verdicts, testimonies and contracts valid, but were also thought to possess the power to punish perjurers with divine retribution; books of Saint’s lives, which were seen as conduits for their associated saint’s power in much the same manner as relics of that saint; and the Gospels themselves, which were occasionally worn as protective talismans or otherwise treated as objects invested with God’s power.\textsuperscript{69} These two kinds of authoritative texts—contract and Holy Writ—combined to produce the period’s most arresting representation of the power of the written word: the image of Christ as contract or book written in His blood and crucified to a cross-as-writing-desk.\textsuperscript{70} This image appears in fourteenth and fifteenth century meditative literature and sermons alike, suggesting that it was significant to literate and educated (though not necessarily scholastic\textsuperscript{71}) as well as less literate Christians. If one adds to these conceptions of the authority of the written word

\textsuperscript{68} Firth Green 275-82.

\textsuperscript{69} Firth Green 257-59

\textsuperscript{70} Firth Green 259.

\textsuperscript{71} Firth Green suggests that this particular image ‘no doubt was felt to smack of a kind of superstitious covenantalism’ in scholastic circles, and was thus largely confined to the realms of personal meditation and popular homily (259-60).
the scholarly understanding of *auctoritas* and the continued emphasis on textual authority within scholastic reading practices, it becomes clear that the association of written text with spiritual and temporal authority was common to nearly all English Christians in the fourteenth century, regardless of their level of education. In the case of *Emaré*, this nigh-unwavering faith in the power of the written word is most clearly demonstrated by Emaré’s admonition to Kadore to *do my lorde commaundement* after viewing the second letter, despite the fact that his order to banish her is an utterly nonsensical response to the happy news of his son’s birth.72

Emaré and Kadore’s willingness to carry out the orders in the letter is further reinforced by the singularity of the mode in which the letter operates. In fourteenth-century English culture, a letter between a king and his subordinate was what Taylor terms a ‘business communication’ primarily concerned with facilitating the governance of the realm in the king’s absence.73 These business communications could have one of two trajectories: from steward to king, or from king to steward. They could also only have one purpose, which was dictated by the obligations of the writer to the reader. Any letter from Kadore to his king ought to contain a truthful account of important events in his kingdom, and might perhaps include a request for further instruction on how to manage affairs in the king’s absence. Conversely, a letter from the king to his steward would contain orders dictating how to proceed in response to the events narrated. The presence of a seal on the letter would vouchsafe both the veracity of the text and the

72 *Emaré* 629.

73 Taylor 61.
official, rather than personal, nature of this type of letter. In describing the King’s composition of his letters, the text makes it clear that they are guaranteed in this same manner: *Anothur lettur then made he, / And seled hyt with hys sele.* While the text does not say that the mother-in-law reproduces this seal, it is most likely that she does, as it operates as the most apparent visual indicator of the authenticity of the letter it marks.

Furthermore, each interpolated letter fits the established pattern of correspondence perfectly: the letter sent to the King informs him of his child’s monstrous birth, while the one received by Kadore provides instruction on how he ought to respond to this tragedy. It is for these reasons that neither Kadore nor the king expresses doubt as to the writer or intent of the letter they receive. Though the news being related and the order being given is shocking, the form of the letter and the method of communication it participates in are exactly what is expected, and so neither man has any reason to suspect subterfuge.

A final reason for their trust in the veracity of the letters is the absolute trust that was placed in the messenger who delivers them. The idea that the letters might have been tampered with while in the messenger’s care is simply inconceivable, as another Auchinleck romance, *Bevis of Hampton*, demonstrates. In a middle episode of this very long text the hero, Bevis, is given a letter by his adopted father, the Saracen king, and

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74 Taylor 61.

75 Emaré 566-67.

76 While penmanship might be a factor in some correspondences, the high likelihood that the King (and perhaps also Kadore) makes use of scribes would make this a less reliable indicator of a letter’s provenance.


78 Emaré 547-65, 602-29.
ordered to take it to his rival, Brademond. The letter contains instructions to execute Bevis, and yet he is trusted to deliver it without fail, and without becoming aware of its contents. The king’s trust proves well-founded, as Bevis refrains from opening the letter even when he is warned by a learned friend of its potential perfidy in the clearest terms possible: “Thow might have gret doute / Thin owene deth to bere about!”79 Bevis delivers the letter intact, and is promptly captured and left to die in a deep pit in accordance with its instructions.80 Throughout the passage in which he carries the letter, Bevis is identified primarily with reference to his role as messenger—not knight, or Christian, or even Englishman, as elsewhere in the narrative.81 While it is partially his loyalty to the writer of the letter that prevents him from opening it, it is also his duty as ‘the messenger’ that pushes him to eschew his own safety in order to deliver the letter unmolested. A similar understanding of the responsibilities of the letter-bearer informs the ill-fated excursion to England in Shakespeare’s Hamlet (though it of course backfires as the prince betrays his role as messenger and reads the letter calling for his death)—an Early Modern drama set in the Middle Ages, and governed by the earlier period’s expectation of the overarching importance of delivering a letter intact. With such great trust placed in the messenger, it would be extraordinarily unusual for either Kadore or his Lord to doubt the integrity of a letter delivered by that messenger’s own hand.


80 Bevis 1390-427.

81 Bevis’ reunion with his friend Terri occurs while he is carrying the letter, and while the hero is initially identified by his origin (His name was ihote Bevoun / Ibore a was at South-Hamtoun), Terri links him to his profession before they part (“Me thenketh, thow ert a massager, / That in this londe walkes her”), and the designation seems to stick. After a brief discussion of another character’s fate, the narrator exclaims, Let we now ben is em Saber / And speke of Beves, the maseger! reminding the reader not just of his predicament, but of the role that he has been required to play in the correspondence between the king and Brademond 1303-4, 1323-4, 1345-6.
Kadore and the king fail to treat the letters as the dangerous forgeries they are not because of any inability to fully rede them, but rather because of their high redeability. That is, their ‘mode of being’ as it relates to fourteenth-century culture is so well known that the king’s mother can easily appropriate and subvert it for her own purposes. While the episode of the cloth illustrated the dire consequences of incorrectly interpreting an unfamiliar text, the case of the letters addresses a different anxiety around romance and other lay readership: the possibility that familiar and influential texts might be subverted by textual operators who had previously been excluded from contact with them. Though the mother-in-law only gains access to the letters themselves by waylaying their messenger, she is able to successfully manipulate them on account of her access to the system of literary production that created them in the first place. She may not be literate in the sense of being able to write herself—the text only tells us that she made the first letter and lette make the second, suggesting that she might have had the assistance of a scribe or other literate helper—but she most certainly understands how letters operate and the form they must take in order to be rede correctly. She is literate in the most relevant of ways: she understands what texts do in her culture, and can manipulate them according to their function even if she cannot write their words herself. Put another way, the mother-in-law can effectively function as a textual operator, even if she cannot serve as an author.

This episode of misredeing and misdirection has much in common with other literary warnings against feminine misuse of texts, and might well be intended to send a similar message. The most well-known English example once again comes from

82 Emare 535.
83 Emare 586.
Chaucer, who used his Wife of Bath to play on and with late-medieval concerns about female textual interpretation. Though critics cannot agree on whether Alyson is meant to be a sympathetic figure, an antifeminist caricature, or something in between, she is inarguably a disruptive figure. She bears the physical attributes associated with lustiness in medieval bodily theory, speaks frankly about sexual desire, and is entirely unabashed about her multiple marriages and wish to have full dominion over her husband. With all of these threats that Alyson poses to a male-dominated culture, it is no surprise that she is also a misreader of texts, and a willful one at that. She twists holy scripture to support her views on sexuality, and is willing to go so far as to physically destroy a text she disagrees with, performing the most drastic of interpretive acts upon it. Another episode of threatening female textual manipulation is Francesca’s misuse of romance in the Commedia, introduced above, which I would now like to examine in more detail alongside Emaré’s own warning against female literacy and textual manipulation.

In her insightful study of the relation between the Francesca episode of Dante’s Commedia and the prose Lancelot to which it refers, Susan Noakes teases out the nature of the young lovers’ misreading of the romance. In her account of their adulterous kiss to Dante’s pilgrim, Francesca turns the text itself into a Pandarus-like go-between that facilitates an adulterous love akin to that between Lancelot and Guenevere: ‘The book

84 In the General Prologue, she is described as dressed in scarlet hose; her face is both boold and reed of heve; and she is gat-toothed (all features associated with hot blood/sanguinity and lust in the humoural system), and wears a paire of spores sharpe, which point to her occasional appropriation of masculine authority (Larry D. Benson (ed.), The Canterbury Tales, The Riverside Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 1987) 456-73).

85 The Prologue tells that Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce, / For she koude of that are the olde daunce, pointing to her romantic—and likely sexual—experience, while in her own Prologue the Wife herself blithely discusses the uses of the penis and a husband’s duty to yelde to his wyf hire dette and announces that she wishes to hold absolute power over her husband’s proper body and to make him her detour and [her] thral (Tales, 475-6; 124-34, 154-9).

86 Chaucer, Tales, 71-6, 142-6, 788-93.
was Galleot, Galleot the complying. Such an accusation grants the text the power to corrupt its readers and to lure them even into mortal sin—a common enough medieval condemnation of secular, earthy romance. The problem with the prose *Lancelot,* however, is that it is not a licentious celebration of adulterous love, but rather a strongly moralistic text that condemns Lancelot and Guenevere’s adultery. Lancelot’s sexual impurity is the explicit cause of the failure of his quest for the Holy Grail, and the text so pointedly attacks the idea of ‘courtly love’ as an appropriate motivator for Christian chivalric action that its composition has been attributed to such religious orders as the Templars and Cistercians. Francesca’s view that it was the text itself that led them to adultery is thus the result of a catastrophic misreading of its meaning and intent. As Noakes puts it, ‘their torment is the result of a misreading of a text which intends to edify.’ The question then becomes one of Francesca’s intent in both her misreading and her presentation of the episode: was the misreading simply an error, the result of a lack of thoroughness in their reading of the text (since Francesca states that they ‘read no more that day’, and so never learned of the in-text consequences of Lancelot’s submission to lust); or was it instead a willful misinterpretation intended to excuse the consummation of existing desire?

The focus of the question on Francesca comes from Paolo’s silence in the episode—while the reader might like to know what his motivations and desires are, the


88 Regardless of the accuracy of such attributions, the religious and moralistic tone of the romance is strong enough for such a provenance to be at least plausible (Noakes 226).

89 Noakes 226.

90 Dante, V. 138.
episode’s narration puts the focus squarely on Francesca. Unfortunately, this has led some critics to speculate on the willfulness of her misreading in a manner that would fit right in with the views of medieval misogynists. Mark Musa, for example, compares Francesca to Eve tempting Adam in Eden, and finishes his assessment of her character by noting that ‘[p]erhaps we should not blame the pilgrim for being taken in by Francesca; dozens of critics, unaware of the wiles of sin, have also been seduced by her charm and the grace of her speech.’\footnote{Quoted in Noakes 222.} Those critics who choose to see her as an object of pity instead of condemnation must likewise fall to speculation as to her motives and even agency within the episode. All that Commedia tells the reader is that the couple were reading the prose Lancelot and, at a pivotal moment in the text, Paolo leaned over and kissed Francesca. His desires in doing so, as well as any role she might have played as the coquette who tried to ‘force his glances’,\footnote{Musa, quoted in Noakes 225.} remain a mystery to the reader. The event that precipitated the young lovers’ damnation is obscured by the layer of narration that Dante imposes between it and the reader: it is not a moment witnessed and related by the pilgrim, but instead exists only in a story that Francesca tells him. It is to this story that I wish to draw closer attention.

Regardless of what her intentions and desires were during the kiss itself, Francesca chooses to frame her narrative of that damning moment in a very particular way that reveals much about her cultural literacy and understanding of the modes of being of chivalric romance in her own (and the pilgrim’s) cultural context. Whether the romance actually did serve as an invitation to carnal sin is less relevant than the fact that it was the kind of text that was thought to provide such a dangerous temptation. As

\footnote{Quoted in Noakes 222.}
\footnote{Musa, quoted in Noakes 225.}
moralists of the period make clear, romances had the power to lure their readers into immoral acts by virtue of their depiction of behaviour such as adultery and treason, and their lack of a clearly explicated moral, such as might accompany an exemplum. The Lancelot is particularly susceptible to such misreading, in that it depicts physical adultery in frank—even sensual—terms such as the following: *Ainsi jurent toute la nuit ansamble et ot li uns de l’autre toute la joie qu’il avoient si longuement desirree.* Though Lancelot’s disgrace as a result of the adultery is made just as explicit, it comes long after the consummation, and would have been missed by anyone who did not read to the end of the tale (as Francesca claims was the case with her and Paolo). An incomplete reading of the romance would thus produce exactly the sort of confusion that contemporary moralists feared would arise from the reading of texts that presented immoral and moral behaviours side-by-side. In fact, Francesca presents her and Paolo’s transgression as the simple emulation of immoral behaviour at the moment of reading:

> But just one moment overcame us—when  
> We read of the smile, desired for lips long-thwarted,  
> Such smile, by such a lover kissed away,  
> He that may never more from me be parted  
> Trembling all over, kissed my mouth.  
>  
> (Dante, *Hell*, V, 128-36)

In accusing the text of producing exactly the sort of effect that she might have been warned against by religious authorities, and positioning herself and Paolo as ignorant readers who were ‘overcome’ by the power of sensuous narrative, Francesca lessens the gravity of their transgression and elicits pity, rather than condemnation, from Dante’s

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pilgrim. Her account of the text’s effect is so closely in keeping with the reader’s (or listener’s, in the case of the pilgrim) expectations of what such a text might do, that she is able to effectively elicit sympathy from those who witness her just punishment for giving in to mortal temptation. In such a reading of Francesca’s engagement with the romance text, she is neither a careless misreader who does not understand the true nature of the Lancelot nor a wily seductress who uses the text to lead her lover into sin, but a canny textual operator who uses her knowledge of how texts like the Lancelot are commonly understood within her culture to manipulate her own audience’s response to her story.

Both Francesca and Emaré’s mother-in-law successfully produce narratives that elicit the desired response from their reders by manipulating not only the material of the texts they engage with, but the ways in which those texts interact with their readers and writers in a given context. Their cultural literacy grants them the power to usurp the authorial role from the men that have traditionally held it, while their apparent lack of training in moral reading practices such as exegesis makes it more likely that they will use such a power for questionable ends—whether they do so malevolently or in ignorance. The danger of female literacy, at least as it is depicted in these two episodes, comes not from women’s access to texts that might corrupt them (Jean de Meun’s innocent, easily misled readers), but from their ability to effectively corrupt texts by putting them to uses other than those for which they were intended and manipulating the expectations of their audience.

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94 Dante V, 141-42.
Textual bodies and rehabilitative reading

After presenting two episodes of catastrophic misreading, one facilitated by masculine ignorance and the other by feminine manipulation, Emaré ends with a series of scenes of female-directed correct reading by its hapless male protagonists, as both Artyus and the King are presented with Emaré’s son, Segremour, and manage to identify him as her child, eventually leading to the entire family’s reunion and reconciliation. At this point, it may be worth asking why Segremour’s appearance in the recognition/reconciliation scenes at the end of Emaré is even necessary. While it would certainly makes sense to introduce a new (grand)son to complete the family reunion, the initial recognition could simply occur without his intercession, or with Emaré and Segremour being revealed simultaneously. The common romance trope of using an intermediary to produce surprise reunions and otherwise facilitate relationships between male and female characters in particular might certainly play a role, but there is also a need for the addition of a further text to a romance so preoccupied with misreading and its consequences. Misreading, after all, is the cause of Emaré’s suffering and her family’s separation, and it must be addressed and corrected before reconciliation can occur. Segremour is both a text and a member of the soon-to-be-reunited family, and as such is perfectly situated to bring them back together. Furthermore, he is exactly the right kind of text, being manipulated by the right kind of operator (Emaré), to reassert order to the narrative via correct reading.

The idea that a human being might be read as a text is by no means unique to Emaré. Victoria Warren’s work on Troilus and Criseyde neatly points to how Criseyde

95 Other useful go-betweens in the romance tradition include the young Amoraunte in Amis and Amiloun, the fairy lady’s handmaiden in Sir Launfal, and the more morally ambiguous Pandarus in Troilus and Criseyde and Brangwain in Tristan and Isolde.
functions as a text throughout the narrative and in particular her relationship with Troilus, while Laura Ashe’s ‘Reading Like a Clerk in The Clerk’s Tale’ adroitly links the tale’s happy ending to Griselda’s very deliberate reading of Walter and his behaviour.\(^{96}\) Ashe’s work is of particular relevance here, as she presents a case of thoughtful, rehabilitative reading that ‘is powerful enough to become [Walter’s] salvation.’\(^{97}\) Emaré achieves a similar result—the recovery and forgiveness of her father and husband and the reunion of her family—by presenting her own son to be read correctly, in a reversal of sorts of the original misreadings in the first half of the narrative.

As with the letters and the cloth, both Segremour’s form and his content (in this case, his speech and behaviour towards the Emperor and his father) are there to be read. The problem—one unique to this living text, at least within the context of the poem—is that his form and content appear to have different authors, and so may diverge even more dramatically in their intended meanings than any other text encountered thus far, further complicating the reading process. Segremour’s form is, of course, his body. While both of his parents have certainly had a hand in producing it, the late medieval understanding of conception and reproduction places the responsibility for shaping—or authoring—that form solely in the hands of his father. Throughout the majority of the Middle Ages, doctors and philosophers alike argued over the role of women in the conception and intra-uterine development of their infants. The Aristotelian idea that women supplied the vessel and some of the raw material for the development of the child, while men’s semen provided the organizing power and intent that formed an individual, was pitted against


\(^{97}\) Ashe 942.
the ill-defined idea of ‘female sperm’, which was thought to have a role in the formation of the embryo by medieval interpreters of Galen. By the time of Emaré’s composition in the fourteenth century, medical opinion had settled on a ‘cautious Galenism’ that admitted that female emissions were necessary to the production of a viable embryo, but followed Aristotle in attributing the imposition of form solely to the male. The production of Segremour, then, required the participation of both Emaré and her husband, but only the King could rightfully be considered the boy-text’s author. In Aristotelian terms, both parents are agents of the text’s formal cause, but only his father contributes to the final cause. This picture is problematized, however, by the fact that Segremour offers more up to interpretation than just his form. His behaviour, and more specifically his repetition of a carefully-coached performance for which Emaré has prepared him, features just as prominently as his appearance in the recognition sequences. This duality is made evident in Emaré’s initial preparation of the boy, when she tells him:

My dere sone so fre,  
Do a lytull aftur me,  
And thou shalt have my blessynge.  
Tomorowe thou shall serve yn halle,  
In a kurtyll of ryche palle,  
Byfore thy nobull kyng.  
Loke, sone, so curtays thou be,  
That no mon fynde chalange to the  
In no manere thynge!  

(Emaré 844-52)

Emaré then goes on to lay out in detail how Segremour ought to behave, making sure that he says and does appropriately curtays things, but also ensuring that he makes himself as visible as possible to the King by kneeling before him, taking his hand, and pouring him

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99 Jacquart and Thomasset 69-70.
his wine. Thus, Segremour’s *ryche kurtyll* and genealogically evocative features will combine with the speech and actions he has rehearsed to facilitate the King’s recognition of his son and, later, his long-lost wife. Since Segremour was raised more or less entirely by his mother, the behaviour and bearing that marks him as a descendant of high nobility might be attributed to her authorship, even as his physical form derives entirely from his father. Such a simple duality is complicated, however, by the medieval notion that noble behaviour was just as much a product of biological origin as a noble visage. Pelinore’s bastard son, Torre, in Thomas Malory’s *Mort Darthur* serves as an excellent literary example of this conceit; though he has been raised entirely by his mother, a peasant woman, he is naturally drawn to the knightly pursuits more suited to his true parentage.

As the boy’s erstwhile father explains to King Arthur:

> I have thirtene sonnes, and all they woll falle to what laboure I putte them and woll be right glad to do laboure; but thys chylde woll nat laboure for nothynge that my wyff and I may do, but allwey he woll be shotynge, or castynge darte, and glad for to se batayles and to beholde knyghtes: And allwayes day and nyght he desyrith of me to be made knyght.

(Malory, *Morte Darthur*, 64)

Arthur then orders the man to bring forth all of his sons, and confirms that *Torre was nat lyke hym, nother in shape ne in countenance, for he was muche more than ony of hem.*

Torre’s appearance and his noble character are taken together as proof of his paternity and the suitability for knighthood that comes with it, and the boy is immediately knighted. If Segremour’s behaviour can likewise be attributed solely to his father’s biological legacy, then it is more appropriate to think of Emare as a skilled operator

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100 Emare 853-58.


102 Malory 64.
whose careful positioning of her son in the King and Artyus’ paths can be viewed as the same sort of textual manipulation that her mother-in-law and Dante’s Francesca engage in, as she ensures that the text of Segremour is made both visible and redeable to his father and grandfather. As such, she can serve as a positive example of female textual manipulation to counter the threatening presence of her mother-in-law.

Although the reconciliation scenes concern themselves with the reunion of Emaré and her two estranged male authority figures, the focus of description is Segremour, and not either one of his parents or his grandfather. Just before the King and Artyus arrive in Rome, the text gives an account of Segremour’s appearance and behaviour that will serve as a sort of blueprint for others’ recognition of his noble parentage:

When the chylde was seven yer olde,
He was both wyse and bolde,
And wele made of flesh and bone;
He was worthy unthur wede
And right well kowthe pryke a stede;
So curtays a chylde was none.
All men lovede Segramowre,
Bothe yn halle and yn bowre,
Whersoevur he gan gone.

(Emaré 733-41)

The passage emphasizes the unity of physical beauty (*wele made of flesh and bone*) with *curtays* behaviour and skill (such as horsemanship) that defines a noble hero in romance texts. Within the logic of medieval romance—and medieval thought on a beautiful body’s reflection of the soul’s goodness—this combination of qualities inevitably inspires love (*all men lovede Segramouwre*) in those with whom the hero comes into contact. It is also
frequently summed up in the commonplace *worthy under wede*, which is here applied the Segremour and which is applied to Emaré herself earlier in the same text.  

Even more importantly, this combination of qualities frequently allows for the identification of a hero even when he is in disguise, or otherwise outside of his ordinary context. In *King Horn*, sometimes considered the most archetypal or straightforward of the popular romances, the exiled Horn is repeatedly singled out from among his eleven traveling companions, all of whom are of similar apparent rank to him, for the exceptional qualities that mark him as a fitting suitor for the princess Rymenhild; as his loyal friend Athulf points out: “*Ne beo we noght iliche: / Horn is fairer and riche, / Fairer bi one ribbe / Thanke eni manne that libbe*”¹⁰⁴ In another popular romance, *Havelock the Dane*, the titular hero spends some time in hiding, working as a lowly cook. He quickly distinguishes himself through his great humility, charity and physical strength, as well as his beauty, and his master decides to take pity on his poverty and gives him clothing, shoes and hose.¹⁰⁵ Once he has been so clad, Havelock is described in the following terms:

> Was non so fayr under God,  
> That evere yete in erthe were,  
> Non that evere moder bere;  
> It was nevere man that yemede  
> In kinneriche that so wel semede  
> King or cayser for to be,  
> Than he was shrid, so semede he;

*(Havelock 973-9)*

¹⁰³ *Emaré* 250. ‘*Wede*’, Middle English Dictionary, 2001, University of Michigan, 15 September 2011 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/medidx?type=byte&byte=236848288&egdisplay=compact&egs=236872778>


¹⁰⁵ *Havelock the Dane* in Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake and Eve Salisbury (eds.) 946-71.
Thus, the simple addition of clothes more befitting a man of his standing (though they remain very modest) brings out his innate nobility and displays it for all to see. The French Arthurian tradition also features such moments of recognition, as in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain*, where the young knight is recognized immediately by a passing damsel who finds him sleeping naked under a tree after he has spent years living in a forest ‘like a madman and a savage’, and who nevertheless describes him as ‘the most accomplished knight in the world, and the most virtuous’.106

It should be no surprise, then, the Segremour’s innate courtesy and beauty inspire both love and recognition in his father and grandfather at the moment of their first meeting. The language describing his first contact with the King is nearly identical to the initial description quoted above:

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The chylde hem served so curteysly,  
All hym loved that hym sy,  
   And spake hym gret honowres.  
Then sayde all they loked hym upon,  
So curteys a chylde sawe they nevur non,  
   In halle ny yn bowres.

(Emaré 868-73)
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While some of this similarity may be due to conventional repetition forced on the poem by its metre and rhyme scheme, it serves to emphasize the impact of Segremour’s appearance on those around him, and the rightness of his being recognized as a person of worth and status. A more powerful recognition is suggested by the King’s first address to him, when he refers to him as *Swete sone*.107 Though this was a form of address for a young man of lower rank, it was much more frequently used in the familial sense, an


107 *Emaré* 875.
intimacy that is further suggested by the use of the adjective *swete.* The King does not immediately put two and two together, but does feel great love for the child, and wishes to bring him to his court and make him a great lord, as befits someone of his noble station. Put another way, he correctly reads the combination of Segremour’s physical appearance and behavioural presentation, and identifies him as worthy of being integrated into the extended family circle of his court, if not his nuclear family itself. His love for and even desire to possess the *lytyll body* leads him to follow the boy to his mother, even though he has no reason to believe that she might be alive. In this moment, Segremour’s true function within the text is revealed. Though his presence is not required for the reunion to take place in practical terms—Emaré could just as easily approach her husband immediately—it is necessary as a means of testing whether or not the King has recovered from his earlier grievous error, and learned to *rede* correctly. If the King does not take notice of Segremour and respond to him in the appropriate way, then he loses the opportunity to be reunited with his estranged wife. His presence allows for a resolution of the true problem within the narrative, which is the double misreading that leads to the sundering of Emaré’s family, and not that sundering itself.

Segremour’s grandfather is afforded a similar opportunity to properly *rede* a significant text as a means of recovering from his earlier mistake – to preform what we might term a redemptive act of reading – and is likewise successful. He too both recognizes Segremour’s status and comes to love him, and is rewarded by being reunited.

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108 ‘Sone,’ Middle English Dictionary, 2001, University of Michigan, 15 September 2011 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED41557>. “Son” is meaning (1), while “young man” is (6).

109 Emaré 884, 897-900.

110 Emaré 897.
with his family, which has now been enlarged to include an heir, sparing him the fate of familial extinction that seemed to be inevitable at the end of the narrative’s first part. The second recognition and reunion scene, in which Artyus is first introduced to his new grandson, also serves as a window into Emaré’s skill at manipulating and presenting the text of Segremour in a fashion that encourages correct reading. Before his initial meeting with his grandfather, Emaré admonishes Segremour to *yn all thing / Be redy with my lord the kyng, / And be my swete sone*!\(^{111}\) The key to his performance is the establishment of his parentage and the link between Segeremour and both Emaré and Artyus’ new son-in-law, the King of Galys. The recognition of this latter kinship is facilitated by the physical positioning of the boy and his father when they come to meet Artyus. Whereas Emaré displayed Segremour in an entirely subordinate position to his father when she introduced them, mimicking the hierarchical relationship between fathers and sons, she here displays the two ‘texts’ side-by-side, granting them equal importance before the Emperor and even telling Segremour to ensure their equivalent treatment:

> When the Emperour kysseth thy fadur so fre,  
> Loke yyf he wyll kysse the  
> Abowe the to hym sone;  
> And bydde hym come speke with Emaré,  
> That was putte ynto the see,  
> Hymself yaf the dome.

\(^{(Emaré\ 979-84)}\)

As in the reunion with the King, correct reading is the prerequisite for reunion with Artyus’ missing daughter. In this case, however, Artyus must demonstrate not a will to possess and care for Segremour, but an acknowledgement of his high status and connection not just to Emaré, but to his father. The difference in required interpretations can be explained by the difference in magnitude and nature between Artyus’ and his son-

\(^{111}\) *Emaré\ 976-78.*
in-law’s errors in reading. The King, along with his steward, was misled by his mother’s false letters, and responded to them in a manner that would have been appropriate had they been true—exile, after all, was seen as the appropriate punishment for a woman who bore a monster (or, less fantastically, a bastard, which of course can be read as a monstrosity in terms of the importance of royal genealogies). His error therefore lies only in reading the wrong text—his mother’s letter instead of his son’s body—and can be corrected by an identification and interpretation of the true text of Segremour. Artyus, on the other hand, read the right text in the wrong way, and was driven by his gross misapprehension of the nature of the cloth to break the incest taboo and attempt to wed his daughter, before unjustly banishing her for her refusal. When preparing their reunion, Emaré recognizes that Artyus’ must answer for more than just the initial misreading, and adjusts her manipulation of Segremour accordingly.

It is for this reason that Segremour reminds Artyus of his exile of his daughter even as he brings him to her (Hymself yaf the dome); the Emperor must recognize that he not only misread, but also that he acted upon his misreading in a destructive manner. The initial incestuous reading, on the other hand, is corrected by the simultaneous presentation of the texts of Segremour and his father. Gail Ashton argues that, in the reunion, Emaré ‘places Segramour next to her husband, a positioning that deflects her father’s own desire for her and demonstrates that she is the wife and mother of these men, chosen without her father’s aid.’ Ashton is absolutely correct in pointing out that the equal presentation of father and son points at once to their blood ties and their familial relationship to Emaré, which places her at the centre of the kind of family that is part and parcel of the happy endings to the romances inscribed on the cloth she has borne.

\footnote{Ashton 424.}
throughout her adventures, and which is untainted by incest or other transgressive desires. I would argue, however, that her reason for presenting them to Artyus is not a deflection of his ongoing desire for her (since the very thing that has brought Artyus to Rome is his recognition of his sins against his daughter and his desire for penance) or an assertion of her independence and ability to choose her own partner, but rather a means of granting him the opportunity to read yet another romance—that of Emaré and the King of Galys—and to recognize its meaning correctly. This time, instead of not being able to see the story for the rich jewels that encrust it, Artyus sees in Segremour and the King the ending to his daughter’s story, as well as the potential for his own appropriate position with the newly created family: as grandfather and patriarch, and not as lover.

By building her son into an archetypal noble hero and then maneuvering him into the path of her father and husband, Emaré not only effects the reunion of her sundered family, but also allows the two men to answer appropriately for their crimes against her. Instead of a penance granted by the Pope (the appropriateness of which would be questionable in this text, given that he issued the Bull that would have allowed Artyus to marry his own daughter in the first place), absolution for Artyus and the King of Galys lies in a second act of reading and an appropriate response to it. Emaré’s actions both demonstrate the positive power of female literacy and manipulation of texts and re-assert the importance of reading correctly to the figures within her romance world, as well as the readers of her own, larger text.
Conclusion

The popular romance *Emaré* is an important and overlooked voice in the late medieval debate over the dangers of misreading and the value of romances in particular. It manages at once to demonstrate an effective use of the exemplary form to grant to a secular, vernacular text the quality of *utilitas*, and to provide a nuanced picture of feminine textual engagement that allows for the possibility of positive female reading in a culture that was wary of literate women and their abilities. The clear, episodic structure of the romance and its repetition—both features considered stylistically unsophisticated and aesthetically uninteresting—serve to clearly reinforce its message that acts of reading and misreading are vitally important and have spiritual and temporal consequences. Each instance of reading is immediately followed by consequences that are unambiguously negative or positive, depending on whether or not the reading was conducted correctly: Artyus’ misreading of the cloth leads to the loss of his only child and so his entire genealogical potential; the King of Galys’ failure to note his mother’s manipulation of his letters costs him his wife and his son and heir, while his correct reading of Segremour allows for their reunion with him; Artyus’ correct reading is linked to his spiritual rehabilitation as well as the reunion of his family, and allows for a happy ending to this potentially tragic tale. By presenting its case so clearly, *Emaré* provides an answer to the question of how romances might be read correctly and usefully, even as it addresses mistrust of romance texts by having the very first subject of misreading, the cloth, take the form of a romance text itself.

The problem with the cloth, however, is not its content—which might have directed Artyus away from his incestuous desires if he had paid it attention—but rather its
form. Artyus cannot read the cloth properly because it is a female-authored text that presents its material in a feminine mode he is not accustomed to treating as text, and so he misreads the object as a simple transportation mechanism for the gemstones he values. This misreading, along with the King of Galys’ complete lack of awareness of what his mother has done to his letters, points to the true dangers of female engagement with the literary world. As Emaré’s rehabilitation of her husband and father via textual manipulation makes clear, the mere presence of female textual operators is not necessarily a danger to the moral order. The problem, rather, is male readers’ ignorance of how women engage with texts, and of the differences between female reading and writing and male literacy. Had Artyus known that the ‘women’s work’ of weaving could produce texts as well as expensive marvels, he might have taken more care in his engagement with the cloth and heeded its implicit warning against the relationship he wished to begin with his daughter. Had his son-in-law been aware of his mother’s ability to understand and manipulate the movement and reception of his letters, he might have paid more heed to the movements of his messenger, and been more skeptical of the letters’ extravagantly unusual contents. That these men are able to understand and appropriately respond to the text of Segremour further supports this reading: a child is one of the few texts that women were understood to manipulate, and even participate in the production of, even as their form and content was recognizably masculine in origin, and so familiar and readable. According to Emaré, women readers are not the problem; male readers’ ignorance of their skill and abilities, meanwhile, can have dramatic and destructive consequences. The examples within the romance thus provide warning and guidance to both male and female readers of Emaré: male readers are pushed to pay
attention to the ways in which their female counterparts participate in the reception and circulation of texts, and are warned that they ignore them at their peril; female readers, on the other hand, are given the positive example of Emaré and the negative example of her mother-in-law as guides for how they ought to exercise their skills and responsibilities as ethical readers.

In this project, I set out to further illuminate late-medieval responses to the challenges posed by lay literacy and its spread in the fourteenth century by closely examining one literary text that was contextually situated at the nexus of a multitude of concerns—about romance, about misreading, and about women reading and manipulating texts. Though I realize that one text can only add a small amount of new information to this wide-ranging and lengthy discussion, it is my hope that this work on Emaré can provide an example of the kinds of questions we ought to be asking of lesser-known literary works in order to flesh out our understanding of the complex reception of late-medieval romance, as well as a taste of the depth and complexity of the answers they can provide us. How these texts respond to the reception their genre has received, and in particular how they use the means available to them and dictated by the form itself—most prominently the exemplary mode—can serve as a larger window into the many ways in which texts of all aesthetic and intellectual levels participate in the ongoing dialogue between writer, critic and audience, none of which can be truly separated.
Works Cited


