

The Divided Text of the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*

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The Middle English romance of *Amis and Amiloun* is regarded by Leach as a tale of ideal friendship, a didactic tale in which the friendship is tested increasingly severely up to the point of supreme sacrifice. This is a friendship celebrated as above all other virtues, even as an excuse for evil deeds in its name.¹ Foster sees the testing of the vow of friendship as the heart of the romance: he says that the 'pledge is to be maintained even when it comes into conflict with competing moral values, which it does in a succession of events'; the problems the friends face are more important than their characterisation.² Amis is in a compromised position in relation to the steward's accusation, and he abuses his troth-plight to save himself.³ Meanwhile, in keeping his word to Amis, Amiloun is directly challenging God, and the promised leprosy follows.⁴ Of the final scene, Foster says, 'the narrator will not leave well enough alone' and Amiloun has to be healed of his leprosy; 'this procedure occasions still further moral ambiguities'.⁵ Jennifer Fellows thinks we 'should probably regard Amiloun's affliction with the disease less as a result of wrongdoing than as a supreme test of his friendship for Amis'.⁶

Following these approaches, we have had to consider how the controlling purpose of the author has worked his raw material into a finished narrative of this kind. But, while seeing the force of these arguments, I myself want to consider the text as a divided one, one where the theme of the maintenance of a pledge in the face of increasingly extreme predicaments, is making use of a plot which has its own, hidden agenda in which there can be no such extreme predicaments and no moral themes. In such a textual situation, the theme of the testing of a pledge would belong to an overlay, while the plot beneath would have its own entirely separate function, a function in which the author was also involved, but without awareness of it; it would be beyond his control as an author. The genres of romance and folktale seem sometimes to encourage the emergence of narrative from a deeper level of the mind than most storytelling. There is research going on now in other disciplines into how the brain may be using narrative at deep levels for its ongoing functioning. The conflicts in the resulting text clearly did not trouble the author nor his audience: a divided text would be a rich one, and a potential problem only for the critic.

It is the moral ambiguities that have troubled critics most and I am also interested in the features which conflict with the theme of the testing of a friendship. The most striking of these features is the lack of contact between the friends for many years after Amiloun becomes a leper. The friends are pledged never to fail in helping each other, having plighted their troth as children to hold together at every need, in happiness and woe, wrong and right:

While þai mi3 t liue & stond
þat boþe bi day & bi ni3t,
In wele & wo, in wrong & ri3t,
þat þai schuld frely fond
To hold to-gider at eueri nede,
In word, in werk, in wille, *in* dede,
Where þat þai were in lond,
Fro þat day forward neuer mo
Failen oþer for wele no wo:
þer-to þai held vp her hond. Leach, ll. 147-156

When they have to part, on the death of Amiloun's father, this friendship troth is reaffirmed.⁷ And yet, while Amis can travel to seek Amiloun's help, Amiloun does not seek Amis for many years, and meanwhile Amis is content to know nothing of the friend to whom he owes so much. It is Amiloun's nephew Amoraunt who shows steadfast loyalty during this time. So can we say in reply to this that the leprosy is a supreme test of friendship? It would make some sense as a step forward in the severity of the testing, but is it really convincing in this role? One problem is that it is Amiloun once again who is enduring the testing, when he has just endured it by undertaking the substitution in the judicial combat.

Also conflicting with the theme of the testing of a friendship are the curious events surrounding the judicial combat. The raw material of the lovers Amis and Belisaunt is too slight and absurd for so lofty a theme, and there isn't enough necessity behind the extreme steps of lying to the duke and substituting Amiloun. As Leach points out, the crisis could have been avoided if Amis and Belisaunt had gone together to the duke with their problem:⁸ after all, Amis is a knight and the son of a baron, and Belisaunt's father permits her to marry Amis after the combat. The narrative's tortuous alternative course of the accusation, denial and use of Amiloun in the tricked trial by combat must be there for a reason, while it does not fit well with the testing of a friendship.

These problems either do not appear or are not obtrusive in Radulfus Tortarius's Latin version.⁹ In that version, the leper goes to his friend without delay, and is immediately welcomed lovingly. The Latin version's treatment of the wooing lady episode creates no problems either: the young man is not afraid, like Amis, that the daughter will destroy him if he doesn't love her and that her father will do so if he does. Nor does he lie to her father (a king in this text). The fair-minded king unilaterally decides that there will be a judicial combat to establish the truth. The young man asks his friend to help by impersonating him at the trial, but this presents no obtrusive problems in this version, because, as Leach says, the text is a summary, and its purpose didactic, glorifying friendship; its spirit is sternly classical. In the Middle English version, Amis tells his sureties, Belisaunt and her mother, that he is afraid to fight because he is wrong and the accuser right, and all three agree to the substitution because the accuser 'wip wrong' will destroy them all three.¹⁰ The Latin version shows no such moral confusion and the accuser is simply dispatched as a foul liar in a tricked judicial combat. The treatment in the English text brings out latent problems in the plot shared by both texts.

The separating sword episode in the Middle English version also seems unnecessary. Amis could have waited in the woods until his friend returned from the combat, and Amiloun could have told his wife that he was going to court to visit Amis. Leach concludes that the episode is to test Amis's friendship, just as the friendship of Amiloun is being tested at the judicial combat.¹¹ Certainly, the incident works as a test, though not as gruelling a one as Amiloun is undergoing. It also has the important function of bringing Amiloun's wife into the narrative. Amiloun's wife is described as unnatural -- 'vnkende'¹² -- and 'wicked & schrewed',¹³ but she is the plot's moral commentator on the substitution. Jennifer Fellows asks us to note 'how the Middle English poet seeks to disarm potential criticism of the somewhat dubious morality of his romance by putting [a] perfectly valid (and, indeed, 'correct') appraisal of the situation into the mouth of a character' so described.¹⁴ I think Amiloun's wife also has a function at the heart of the plot, where there is a deep sense of wrongdoing.

It is Amis's lie which leads to the substitution in the judicial combat, and the judicial combat is the means by which the lady is won. The combat intended to decide whether Amis has been a traitor becomes, without comment, the occasion of his being granted the duke's land and daughter.¹⁵ I have to ask if this is why Amiloun is in the plot -- to win the trial by combat on behalf of a guilty hero, not to save him from a traitor's death, but to win him the lady and the land.

I find that important, strategic words are spoken by two characters both presented as wicked. We have the 'false steward' -- so named, although he does his duty towards his master -- and, later in the plot, Amiloun's wife. The steward tells the duke that he has a thief in his court, a traitor who has lain with his daughter:

“In þi court þou hast a þef,
þat haþ don min hert gref,
Schame it is to sain,
For, certes, he is a traitour strong,
When he wiþ tresoun & wiþ wrong
þi douhter haþ forlain!” ll. 787-92

Amis is accused of theft and treachery, an accusation which I find frequently plays a strategic role in the plots I have been investigating.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Amiloun’s wife rebukes her husband for an evil deed in the killing of the steward: “You slew there a gentle knight; truly, it was evil done!”

“Wiþ wrong & michel vnri3t
þou slou3 þer a gentil kni3t;
Ywis, it was iuel ydo!” ll. 1492-4

When Amiloun is struck down by leprosy, she throws at him, “You wretched caitiff, the steward unjustly lost his life, and that is on you seen.”

“þou wreche chaitif,
Wiþ wrong þe steward les his liif,
& þat is on þe sene . . . ll. 1564-6

She drives him out, ushering in the exile which is to be the punishment for the tricked judicial combat. I find that Amiloun’s wife is in the unusual role of a second accuser appearing later in the plot. The steward’s accusation leads to the judicial combat in which the accuser is eliminated and the hero confirmed in sovereignty, and then Amiloun’s wife’s condemns the killing of the first accuser, initiating two purification moves.

The plot I am proposing has no pair of friends pledged to each other, but a single hero, Amis, who has a double, Amiloun, as part of the plot’s arrangements for the acquisition of sovereignty and removal of guilt. There is no ideal friend making a decision to be a substitute, but simply a double placed there to be used. Meanwhile, the overlay has the problem that the plot takes precedence: when the plot has a live agenda -- because the

author is also involved at that deeper level -- it cannot be deflected from its course and is quite unaffected by the author's moral themes, including such a theme as that of ideal friendship. The author's tale of the troth-plight has to ride on the back of an amoral, irrational agenda.

At the beginning of the leprosy episode, Amiloun's wife makes it clear that the killing of the steward in a tricked judicial combat is the reason for the episode. This is in accord with the voice from heaven which gives Amiloun warning before the battle that leprosy will be the punishment for undertaking it.¹⁷ In the overlay, the leprosy, in the words of Foster, might be 'not only a physical visitation but, in medieval lore, a clear sign of moral culpability',¹⁸ while in the underlying plot I see it as the performance of a penance which removes a sense of evil in the action of the previous move. I see the plot as having four moves – that is, four steps in an advance towards a desired state of mind – the leprosy episode being the third. On entering the leprosy move, the hero has won the lady and the land, and needs to remove anxieties over how he has won them.

The first move of this plot sets up apparatus for the protection of the hero. In particular, it provides the double needed for the chosen stratagem of the trial by combat in the second move. The double, having won the judicial combat, killing the accuser, is then the character to perform the following penance. The first move also prepares a jealous enemy for the role of accuser, who is to say the words 'thief' and 'traitor' at strategic points, this setting in motion ritual narrative designed to remove the accusation. Also prepared in the first move are two gold cups to be recognition tokens.

The second move I find to be the sovereignty move, and this move is heavily defended throughout. The hero takes the lady and the land without appearing to do so. He plays a passive role while the lady is made the aggressor. The hero is also defended by the presentation of the accuser as a jealous enemy. Amis's lie, in this Middle English version, denying the accusation, is, at this level, no more than one of the effective strategies used to win the lady, for it leads to the duke's ordering the trial by combat to be won by the double. The move ends when Amiloun's wife speaks the important words of condemnation ushering in the third move.

The third move is the purification move using the double, and this is the first of two final expiation moves. Many magical plots have two such pairs of moves, and the first of the pair always uses surrogates for characters and location, while the second of the pair uses the exact perpetrator and location. Amiloun is the substitute in the action of the sovereignty move, and therefore an unusual but nevertheless good choice for the surrogate to perform the first purification move as leper in his own domain. Meanwhile, Amis is the exact perpetrator in the sovereignty move and appears as such in the fourth

move to make the final reparation in the place where the theft and treachery (so called) were committed.

In the acting out of the penance of leprosy, a process of intensification can be seen to be at work. The leper sinks deeper and deeper into exile and privation, first being driven out of his bedchamber and forced to eat at the end of the table, then, after six months, being banished to a hut at the gate, where he is fed, and, after a year, being left to beg his food elsewhere. In the fourth year there is a famine, and he and his devoted nephew ask his wife for an ass so that they can leave the place. They then have to sell the ass and the nephew carries his lord on his back all winter over the muddy roads. At last they buy a push-cart and with it reach Amis's court. At the gate, Amis sees the leper's gold cup and accuses him of being a thief and a traitor:

“Traitor!” seyð þe douke so bold,
“Where haddestow þis coupe of gold . . . ?
..... þef, þou schalt be slawe . . .” ll. 2077-78, 2098

Then he recognises that the leper is not a thief or a traitor, but the rightful possessor of the gold cup and the source of his sovereignty. He asks forgiveness, and the healing begins.

The fourth move finalises the purification process, using the exact perpetrator and the ritual sacrifice of his children in the very dominion he took, and this brings the plot to an end. The children are restored when the ritual has been performed, just as I find characters always are after being used for ritual punishment in these plots.

These plots are very highly organised from beginning to end, entirely non-rational even in their final resolution, but in every case having a tightly-knit structure which can be studied.

Chart for the Sovereignty Plot of *Amis and Amiloun*

The Author's Overlay

The Plot

<p>1. Amis and Amiloun, the sons of two barons of Lombardy, are born on the same day and cannot be told apart. As children, they pledge never to fail in helping each other. The Duke of Lombardy loves them and gives them high office, but his chief steward becomes jealous. When Amiloun returns home on the death of his father, they reaffirm their eternal faithfulness to each other. A gold cup is made for each of them, which they will always keep with them. The steward seeks friendship with Amis, and Amis angers him by saying he is already plighted. ll. 1-408</p>	<p>Move 1</p> <p><i>The apparatus for the protection of the hero is set up.</i></p> <p><i>He is given a double so that the double can take his place for certain roles, and a jealous enemy is prepared for the role of accuser.</i></p> <p><i>Two gold cups are prepared for the hero and the double, to be recognition tokens.</i></p>
<p>2. The duke's daughter, Belisaunt, forces Amis to become her lover by threatening to tell her father that he tried to violate her. They are spied on by the steward, who tells the duke. Amis denies the steward's accusation and the duke orders a trial by combat. Since the charge is true, Amis cannot defend himself and Amiloun agrees to take his place, in spite of a warning from heaven that he will become a leper if he does so. Amis takes his friend's place during the substitution, placing a sword between himself and Amiloun's wife in bed. The steward is killed, and the duke gives Amis his daughter; Amis becomes ruler after the duke's death. ll. 409-1452</p>	<p>Move 2: Sovereignty Move The hero takes the lady and the land without appearing to do so.</p> <p><i>He goes to bed with the lady, and the accusations 'thief' and 'traitor' are made and denied. The denial leads to the trial by combat, won by the double. This victory eliminates the accuser, and wins the lady and the land for the hero.</i></p>
<p>3.</p> <p>Amiloun's wife is very angry that her husband agreed to such a substitution, condemning the slaying of the steward, and she has no sympathy when he is afflicted with leprosy.</p> <p>She drives him from their bed and board, then from their home, and eventually he has to leave the country. With the help of his sister's son, he has to beg until at last, after many years, he arrives at Amis's court. Amis sends out wine to the leper in his gold cup and Amiloun receives it in his own. Believing that he stole the cup, Amis attacks him until the nephew tells him the truth. ll. 1453-2184</p>	<p>Move 3: First Purification Move using the double (a surrogate)</p> <p><i>A second accuser utters the words of condemnation that evil has been done, and the double's leprosy is the punishment.</i></p> <p><i>The penance of leprosy is acted out, intensifying step by step.</i></p> <p><i>At last, at the hero's gate, the hero sees the leper's gold cup and accuses him of being a thief and a traitor. Then he recognises the leper as the rightful possessor of the gold cup and the source of his sovereignty.</i></p>

<p>4. After a year of caring for Amiloun, both friends dream that he can be cured by being washed in the blood of Amis's children. Amis cuts his children's throats and heals his friend. The children are then found alive, playing. Amiloun then gives his land to his sister's son and goes to live with Amis. ll. 2185-2508</p>	<p><i>Move 4: Second Purification Move using the hero and exact location</i></p> <p><i>The penance acted out by the double can end when the hero performs the sacrifice of his children. When the leper is healed, the children are restored.</i></p>
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¹ MacEdward Leach, ed. *Amis and Amiloun*, EETS No. 203, London, 1937, unaltered reprint, Boydell & Brewer, 2001, pp. xxvii-xxix, xliii.

² Edward E. Foster, ed., *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1997, pp. 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ Jennifer Fellows, ed., *Of Love and Chivalry: an anthology of Middle English Romance*, London, 1993, p. xv.

⁷ MacEdward Leach, ll. 293-300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. lxxviii.

⁹ Radulfus Tortarius, see MacEdward Leach, Appendix A, pp. 101-5, Introduction, pp. xxi-xxxii.

¹⁰ MacEdward Leach, ll. 940-41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. xlvi-xlvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, l. 1456.

¹³ *Ibid.*, l. 1561.

¹⁴ Jennifer Fellows, *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁵ MacEdward Leach, ll. 1384-92.

¹⁶ See Anne Wilson, *Plots and Powers*, Gainesville, 2001, pp. 18-21, 29, 49, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 1249-72.

¹⁸ Edward E. Foster, *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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