

PHYSICAL DISFIGURING AND BODY FORMS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCES

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In recent years scholars have examined body imagery in religious literature, discussed the implications of the body politic, and analyzed the connections between medical and literary texts.¹ But little has been written on unusual body forms in Middle English metrical romances. One major influence on these body forms was the Black Death and its ensuing epidemics. Robert S. Gottfried in *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* discusses a preoccupation with the motifs of death and despair in the fine arts and “the appearance of the *ars moriendi*, the cadaver and death as a major motif in art and literature” (90). However, the evolution in body imagery reflects more than just an increased awareness of disease and decay. The body forms used in the romances after the plague illustrate shifts in religious and gender attitudes, as well as general upheavals in the social hierarchy.

Statistically, it is believed that the plague killed about one third of England's population (Myers 23–24). Derek Brewer explains, “The historian's general view is that the effects [of the Black Death] were to intensify social tendencies already at work, rather than to introduce some totally new element” (37).² Corresponding to what Brewer states, unusual body forms in the arts were not new, but the Black Death intensified their usage. An emphasis on the hideous after the Black Death should not be surprising. As Gottfried states, “In the High Middle Ages, an era of expansion and fruition, literature and art expressed a buoyant optimism. After the Black Death, this was replaced by a pervasive pessimism” (89). Certainly the fine arts evolved more macabre representations after the Black Death. Colin Platt in *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* writes that while the Three Living and Three Dead were common in pre-plague paintings, there was a change of emphasis after the Black Death: “Late-medieval treatments of the *Three Living and Three Dead* are both more plentiful than before the pestilence and more shocking” (151).

The development of body imagery in literature parallels this development of body imagery in the arts.³ Distorted body forms were used in romances before the plague, but after the advent of the plague their usage became more plentiful and more disturbing. For example, compare the Lady of Synadowne's description in *Lybeaus Desconus*, written before the Black Death, with the description of Melusine in *Romans of Partenay*, written in the early 16th century. Both texts describe women

Goodman

whose serpent bodies, particularly their tails, horrify the heroes. The Lady of Synadowne has been bespelled by two brothers who wish to possess her and her lands:

A warm come out apace
Wyth a womannes face,
Was 3ong and nobyng eld;
Hyr body and hyr wyngys
Schynede yn all pynges,
As gold gaylyche y-gyld were,
Her tayle was myche vn-mete
Hyr pawes grymly grete.

(*Lybeaus Desconus* 1990–97)

Melusine's serpent form has been imposed by her mother due to Melusine's unfilial actions. Moreover, Melusine's description is much more sophisticated and less formulaic; furthermore her tail is far more strongly detailed:

At the hole, beheld, perceyuing full welle
Melusine, hou she bathed euerydell,
Unto hir nauell shewing ther full white,
like As is the snow A faire branche vpon
The body welle made, frike in ioly plite,
The visage pure, fresh clenly, hir person
To properly speke off hir faccion,
Neuer non fairer ne more reuerent
But A taill had beneth of serpent!
Gret And horrible was it verily;
With siluer And Asure the tail burlid was,
Strongly the water ther bete, it flashed hy.

(*Romans of Partenay* 2799–810)

The Lady of Synadowne's imposed form functions as a test for the hero. Her disenchantment, which transpires through the *fier baiser*,⁴ is Lybeaus Desconus's final test. Due to the Lady of Synadowne's form, Lybeaus falters and puts the burden of the kiss on the lady herself. However, while he does not perform the kiss, his passivity is never condemned. He is heralded as Gawain's son and later marries the lady. On the other hand, Melusine's imposed serpent form in *Romans of Partenay* is punishment for her treatment of her father. Melusine can be disenchanting by Raymound, but her serpent form signifies the lengthy penance which

she and later Raymound must undergo. Moreover, her appearance, which Raymound discovers by breaking his oath, causes Raymound to curse her for their son Gaffray's burning down the monastery where their other son Fromont lived. Indeed, because of Raymound's failure to uphold his vow, Melusine is never disenchanting. She is cursed to remain a serpent until judgment day.

The pre-plague description of the serpent body form and the resultant actions are not only less detailed, they also have much less social significance. The body form and the *fier baisier* are closely allied to traditional folklore motifs. But in *Romans of Partenay* Melusine's elaborately detailed body form and Raymound's subsequent dishonor and failure to disenchant her demonstrate the shifting social values which were accelerated by the appearance of the Black Death. Through its usage of various body forms,⁵ *Romans of Partenay* confronts critical social issues, including the desire for male progeny, marrying for land and power, and anti-clerical sentiments.

Indeed, changed appearance caused by imposed transformations is one type of body imagery which increased with the plague's manifestations. Transformation is a popular motif in folktales but its usage in medieval romances differs from folktale usage. Imposed transformations, found mainly in twelve metrical romances,⁶ range from the hideous appearances of the loathly ladies to the less awful appearance of the Green Knight to animal forms such as werewolves and serpents. According to W.R.J. Barron's dating in *English Medieval Romance*, eleven of the twelve romances involving imposed transformations were most likely composed after the advent of the plague in 1348. Five were composed within fifty years of the Black Death's arrival in England.⁷ Reasons for the lack of transformation in the romances composed before the Black Death, given the motif's popularity, cannot be easily explained.

However, the increased usage and complexity of the transformation motif after the onset of the plague can be explained. Philip Ziegler states in *The Black Death*, "[T]he Black Death seemed peculiarly well equipped to degrade and humiliate its victims. Everything about it was disgusting, so that the sick became objects more of detestation than of pity" (20). Geoffrey le Baker, a clerk in Oxfordshire, wrote in his chronicle from the 1340s,

People who one day had been full of happiness, on the next were found dead. Some were tormented by boils which broke out suddenly in various parts of the body, and were so hard and dry that when they were lanced hardly any liquid flowed out. . . . Other victims had little black pustules scattered over the skin of

the whole body. (Horrox 81)

Not surprisingly, the fear caused by the Black Death attracted authors to patterns such as transformation with its morbidity and vivid descriptions of deformities and suffering.⁸ Irving Massey states in *The Gaping Pig* that metamorphosis is a morbid subject; generally it does not result from a happy source. It allows tales to be told which deal with loss without introducing death itself. Moreover, Alexander H. Krappe in *The Science of the Folk-tale*, when discussing the absence of death in fairy tales, asserts that fairy tales use circumlocutions such as metamorphosis. This same use of metamorphosis is found in romances written after the plague. Transformation and its subsequent hoped-for disenchantment become surrogate motifs for the sudden and inexplicable suffering which the victims of the Black Death endured.

The transformations in these romances, like the deaths during the plague, seem unfair and arbitrary. Healthy humans change overnight into hideous or unhuman forms. One example occurs in *Thomas of Erceldoune* after Thomas and his lady have lain with one another under the greenwood tree:

Thomas stode vpe in þat stede,
And he by-helde þat lady gaye;
Hir hare it hange all ouer hir hede,
Hir eghne semede owte, þat are were graye.
And alle þe riche clothyng was a-waye,
þat he by-fore sawe in þat stede;
Hir schanke blake, hir oper graye,
And all hir body lyke the lede. (129–36)

The lady, while aware she will undergo this hideous transformation, has only a limited explanation for her changed appearance. The distortions which the plague caused and the suddenness of its appearance are reflected in this abrupt transformation and detailed description. Transformation and disenchantment allow authors to explore the horror of disease and death without initiating a more complex discussion about the incomprehensible disease itself.

But just as a person could be transformed without explanation, a person might hope to be miraculously disenchanting without explanation:

Thomas still als stane he stude,
And he by-helde þat lady gaye;

Scho come agayne als faire & gude,
And also ryche one hir palfraye. (233–36)

This disenchantment occurs without commentary. Indeed, many of the transformation-disenchantment romances hold out the hope of disenchantment, but the explanations for the disenchantments become less complete and the disenchantments themselves become less successful after the plague's recurring epidemics. The straightforward disenchantments and explanations with wicked mothers-in-law and step-mothers found in *Cheuelere Assigne* and *William of Palerne* (romances contemporary with the Black Death) are replaced by the ambiguous disenchantments and explanations found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or arbitrary disenchantments with no explanations found in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, or failed disenchantments found in the *Romans of Partenay*. As doubts about social structures developed, disenchantment as proof of those structures became less guaranteed.

Other unusual body forms are described in romances besides those caused by imposed transformations.⁹ How are these disfiguring diseases and physical distortions portrayed? Leprosy is one of the diseases most deeply etched into the medieval consciousness. Authors who used leprosy in their texts understood its nature not only as a physical but also as a spiritual disease. Saul Nathaniel Brody states in *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature*,

Of all the diseases that afflicted medieval man, leprosy especially came to be understood as divine punishment for sinfulness and to be viewed as no other sickness known to man has ever been. . . . (11)

In *Sir Beves of Hampton*, an early pre-plague romance, in order to protect herself from King Yvor, Josian uses herbs that give her the appearance of having leprosy. The horror with which her appearance is greeted demonstrates the dread with which leprosy was regarded. Yet the description of Josian's appearance is brief: it is a "foule mesel on to se" (3688). No details accompany Josian's supposedly appalling appearance.

Two well-known descriptions of leprosy in Middle English literature are found in *Amis and Amiloun* and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. In *Amis and Amiloun* a voice from heaven warns Amiloun that if he undertakes a judicial battle in the guise of Amis, he will be stricken with leprosy within three years. Scholars debate whether Amiloun's leprosy is a test of his honor or punishment for his deceit.

While his leprosy functions dually, it is more a test than a punishment.¹⁰ Amiloun is healed, something which usually does not occur when disfigurement is explicitly a punishment. Moreover, the romance's early date of composition indicates that Amiloun's leprosy is a test, the use of physical deformity as final punishment emerging only later in the Middle Ages.

As with the serpent form found in *Lybeaus Desconus*, the description of Amiloun's leprous body is brief when the disfiguring first occurs; indeed the description uses the same phrase found in *Sir Beves*: "Fouler messel þar nas non hold / In world þan was he" (*Amis and Amiloun* 1544–45). This brevity later characterizes the sergeant's report of Amiloun to Amis:

& a lazer þer y fond;
Herdestow neuer in no lond
Telle of so foule a þing. (1966–68)

Contrast those brief, formulaic lines with the detailed descriptions from Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, a text which dates from the late 1400s. In the *Testament of Cresseid*, Cresseid is stricken with leprosy after berating the gods for leading her into a life of lust. In a lengthy passage Saturn and Cynthia condemn her actions and curse her appearance. Part of Cynthia's speech recounts some of the physical changes which Cresseid will suffer:

"Fra heit of bodie I the depryue,
And to thy seiknes sall be na recure,
Bot in dolour thy dayis to indure.

"Thy cristall ene mingit with blude I mak,
Thy voice sa cleir vnplсанд hoir and hace,
Thy lusty lyre ouirsprede with spottis blak,
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face:
Quhair thow cummis, ilk man sall fle the place.
This sall thow go begging fra hous to hous
With cop and clapper lyke ane lazarous." (334–43)

Saturn's and Cynthia's curse lasts for over thirty-five lines. Unquestionably, Cresseid's acquisition of leprosy is punishment for her actions: the gods gathered to curse her say as much. Moreover, like Melusine's transformation, Cresseid's cursed appearance will last forever. No offer of salvation or suggestion of forgiveness appears in the text.

Yet, historically, leprosy declined greatly after the appearance of the Black Death. William H. McNeill notes that while the decline cannot be attributed to the fact that all leprosy-infected people died during the plague, “[t]he fundamental fact, nevertheless, was that the number of lepers never again became anything like what it had been before 1346” (175). Would it not be expected then that the descriptions of leprosy in romances of the late 1400s might be less developed than those in the 13th century when leprosy was more prevalent? Instead the brief phrases found in the early *Sir Beves of Hampton* and *Amis and Amiloun* are replaced by the lengthy and grim details of the *Testament of Cresseid*. Leprosy becomes entwined with the plague with a perception of both as divine punishment.

Similarly, the portrayals of physical old age and bodily decay increase after the plague. Shulamith Shahar, in “The old body in medieval culture,” states that while there were positive and negative attitudes toward old age, there were no positive aspects of the aged body itself (161). Few Middle English metrical romances elaborate on the physical appearance of aged bodies, and those few occur after the plague’s arrival. Even the description of the loathly lady from Gower’s “Tale of Florent” in the *Confessio Amantis*, with her “emty skyn / Hangende doun unto the chin” (1.1681–82), while suggesting an ageing body, does not directly state she is old. And while the nameless knight of the Wife of Bath’s Tale clearly states of his loathly lady, “Thou art so loothly, and so oold also / And therto comen of so lough a kynde” (1100–1101), the text contains no description of her aged body.

Perhaps one of the most famous descriptions of an aged body is that of the old woman who is contrasted with Bercilak’s lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

An oper lady hir lad bi þe lyft honde,
 þat watz alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed,

 Rugh ronkled chekez þat oper on rolled;

 þat oper wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,
 Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vayles,
 Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,
 Toreted and treleted with tryflez aboute,
 þat no3t watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake bro3es,
 þe tweyne y3en and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,
 And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered. (947–63)

This detailed description and the subsequent blame put upon the old woman by the males of the romance match Shahar's hypothesis about harmful old women:

[S]ome writers did devote a separate discussion to one particular physiological change in the body of the old woman. . . . After menopause woman was even more dangerous because she had become incapable of eliminating the superfluous matter from her organism. (163)

Certainly, Gawain's diatribe against women in general and his acceptance of the Green Knight's rather flimsy explanation of the recent events reflect a willingness to believe the evil attributed to women, and older women in particular.

In these texts old age as represented by disfigured old bodies does not appear to be a punishment for sins committed, as in the *Romans of Partenay* and the *Testament of Cresseid*, but rather the body's decay reflects the moral and spiritual decay of society. Thus, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Arthur's "childlik" society is tested by an aged body and found wanting. Consequently it is no wonder that for the only time in a transformation-disenchantment text, the resultant disenchantment is not described and the transformed creature chooses not to become a part of the hero's society.

A text which elaborates at great length on the appearance of the body in post-death decay, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*, was composed at the same time or soon after *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this text the body's physical corruption reflects punishment both for individual moral decay and societal spiritual decay:

Bare was þe body, and blake to þe bone
Al biclagged in claye vncomly cladde.
Hit waried, hit waymented, as a Woman
But nauthyr on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.

.....
On þe chef of þe cholle,
A pade pikes on þe polle,
With eighnen holked ful holle,
That Gloed as þe gledes. (105-17)

The horrific appearance of Guenivere's mother illustrates the vileness with which the body's post-death decay was viewed and reflects the same imagery found in funerary brasses and cadaver-effigies as described by

Gottfried:

After the plague, funerary monuments and death masks became common, and their themes changed. Many brasses showed shrouded, macabre corpses or skeletons with snakes and serpents surrounding and protruding from their bones; on their faces were grisly, toothy smiles. (90)¹¹

But there is more to all of these shifting portrayals of physical appearance than just a reflection of the plague. Jacques Le Goff claims, “The body was an *ergastulum*, a slave’s prison for the soul. This was not merely a commonplace image but a definition” (83). Indeed, with this emphasis on the hideous came a vision of God. Brewer states, “[People] had . . . a concept not only of the terrors of judgment after death and the possibility of an eternity of just punishment, but also of the hope of heaven” (37). Elizabeth Petroff writes of Catherine of Siena, “Her mission was to see God in the horror and disorientation and loss of faith in the aftermath of the disaster [the plague]” (17).

This intertwining of undesirable change and religious faith is found in the romances written soon after the plague. In *William of Palerne* Alphouns credits God with his success:

“I am he, þe werwolf” sede alphouns þanne,
“þat haue suffred for þi sake many sori peynes,
& pult þe out of periles þer þou perished schuldest,
nade goddes grete miȝt be & mi gode help.”

(*The Romance of William* 4520–23)

Disenchantment becomes a cause to celebrate God’s grace; repentance becomes key: “I haue þe gretli a-gelt to god ich am a-knowe,” (4391), says Queen Braunden. Hideousness and heaven become conjoined. The transformed or diseased body in its fullest description is loathsome and bestial, and in its disenchanting or cured state is noble and heavenly. The disenchanting and the diseased are saved from bodily and spiritual corruption by the hero-knight, a model of good Christian values.

But, as discussed above, not all transformed creatures are disenchanting and those with body disease and decay are not always healed. Again this change from disenchantment or cure as salvation and repentance demonstrates a linear time-frame. The early pre-plague texts demonstrate wholly disenchanting or miraculously cured body forms. The texts written about the time of the Black Death, such as *Cheuelere Assigne* and *William of Palerne*, demonstrate complete belief in God’s miracles.

Even though one of the swan children in *Cheuelere Assigne* is not returned to his human form, there is no questioning of God.

However, in the later romances there is less celebration of God's miracles and man's capacity to repent and be saved, and more emphasis on sin and divine punishment. The transformed and diseased people are not always disenchanting and their bodies are not cured. These people's sins in some manner are unforgivable, and thus their body forms remain distorted and diseased. Le Goff states, "Sin manifested itself in the form of physical deformity and disease. . . . Man's body was not so much dust as rot" (84). Transformations and diseases are no longer used to demonstrate God's miracles but rather to illustrate mankind's sinfulness and the need for punishment. Melusine, Cresseid, Guenivere's mother: all three suffer eternal punishment for their immoral actions and sinful natures.

Interestingly, these unforgiven sinners with permanently marred bodies are women. Le Goff states, "The height of abomination, the worst of the body and of sexuality, was the female body" (83). Susan Crane's discussion of female body forms underscores the ambiguity with which women were perceived in the Middle English romances. But Crane does not address how these female body images relate to similar male body images. The males whose bodies have been transformed or marred are consistently more positively depicted than similar females.¹² Thus the Green Knight is a well-built man with good features who just happens to be green, while the loathly ladies are hideous. Crane views these loathly women as shapeshifters who are in some manner in control of their body forms: "Belatedly attributing the grotesque body to absent women does not cancel the masquerade performed by unfolding femininity into repulsiveness versus attractiveness" (88). While Crane's theories are helpful, one cannot dismiss those "belatedly" mentioned spell-casting women; after all Morgan le Fay, whose old body is so graphically described in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is one of them. Moreover, in romances that explain the transformations and that were written after the plague, all the transformations are caused or predicted by women. The only male spell-casters are in *Lybeaus Desconus*, a pre-plague romance. Finally, the women to whom the transformations are attributed, such as Matabryne in *Cheuelere Assigne* and Morgan le Fay, are often as physically hideous and always as morally hideous as the marred and diseased women (e.g., Cresseid, Dame Ragnell).

As society became less secure in its belief in God's greatness and man's potential repentance and salvation, the body imagery increasingly used was that of old or distorted females, and those female forms very often were not even offered the possibility of God's forgiveness and their

own salvation. While disfigured males do not disappear from romances, males maintain their physical appeal even when they are transformed and do not represent in any conclusive manner the fear of divine punishment that the female forms do. The disfigured female body became a metaphor for the anguish and despair in God's mercy which evolved during and after recurrences of the plague. According to Hans Baron, "Seldom in the course of the Middle Ages has so much been written concerning the *miseria* of human beings and human life [as] in the period following the terrible epidemics in the middle of the fourteenth century" (qtd. in Ziegler 274). In these romances the disfigured female comes to embody that "*miseria*."

To stop here would leave undiscussed the one seemingly strong contradiction to this argument—the Wife of Bath's Tale. Composed at approximately the same time period as Gower's "Tale of Florent" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it appears to belie the above statements about the effects of the Black Death on body imagery. Although written after the Black Death and with analogues that use strong, detailed descriptions, it offers little description of the loathly lady. We are told only, "A fouler wight ther no man devyse" (999), a phrase as brief as the early descriptions of Josian in *Sir Beves of Hampton* and Amiloun in *Amis and Amiloun*. Considering the overwhelming evidence that detailed physical descriptions of deformed and diseased appearance became the norm after the Black Death, it must be assumed that Chaucer deliberately withheld a catalogue of details of his loathly lady. Of course, it should be noted that he does have an elaborate description of Alisoun, the Wife of Bath herself, and it may be that with her appearance so catalogued, the loathly lady's appearance need not be. Indeed, Carolyn Dinshaw's observation that the Wife of Bath speaks what the "patriarchal hermeneutic necessarily excludes" (114) can lead to speculation that using Alisoun as narrator removes the need for a female spell-caster or transformer. Alisoun controls the story and thus the loathly lady's appearance. But even though Alisoun herself is described vividly, it must be stressed that Chaucer apparently does not want to draw attention to the loathly lady's physical appearance. Chaucer's emphasis is on her age and her breeding. For example, she says of herself, "I be foul, and oold, and poore" (1063), and when the knight prepares for his wedding night, the narrator says, "He nedes moste hire wedde / And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde" (1071–72). Moreover, when the lady confronts the knight with his failure to be a proper husband, the knight condemns her as much for her age and low breeding as for her appearance. All this leads to the lady's sermon on how riches, youth, or good appearance do not prove true honor and gentillesse. If Chaucer had

spent as many lines describing her appearance as did Gower or the author of *Dame Ragnell*, the whole notion of the lady's sermon would have been skewed. Chaucer is not solely concerned, as are some of the other authors, with sin against God and the woman's disfigured body as a symbol of that sin. He is concerned with class structure and social hierarchy, another issue influenced by the Black Death and found in post-plague texts using body imagery. While some of the texts such as *William of Palerne* deal with the new issues of class and hierarchy, Chaucer is interested in far more than recognizing the ascension of these classes. Le Goff states, "Essentially social divisions were best expressed in terms of contrasts between body types: the noble was handsome and well-built, the peasant ugly and deformed" (84). Chaucer turns this belief around to enlighten the knight—whose sins are far more "ugly" than any body form the loathly lady might take, but who still judges by the externals of class and social breeding. In this text the sinner is not ugly or deformed physically, and the physically deformed or marred person is not the sinner.

In conclusion, this paper begins the critical inquiry into the extremely complex issues raised by the unusual body forms found in Middle English metrical romances. Some texts, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Romans of Partenay*, utilize several unusual body forms, yet Chaucer, while stressing physical appearance in *The Canterbury Tales*, deliberately ignores the loathly lady's appearance in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Indeed, as the Wife of Bath's Tale so aptly illustrates, body forms can be used to illustrate not only changes in religious attitudes but also disruptions in the social hierarchy. This wide diversity of approaches to body forms, particularly distorted or diseased ones, requires further study.

Yet certain conclusive statements can be made. That the advent of the Black Death had a strong influence on the portrayal of body forms in Middle English romances is undeniable. The change in body imagery in Middle English romances and the growth in deformed and disfigured body forms after the Black Death is striking. This same influence can be seen in the arts and architecture from the plague period. As Colin Platt asserts, "[T]he historian of today who overhastily dismisses the pestilence as a factor in the arts is just as likely to be at fault as those who, in the past, have made too much of it" (183).

Moreover, the need to disguise the plague and the fear of death in terms of metamorphosis is clear. Imposed transformations and disenchantments become far more prevalent after the plague. As common folktale motifs, transformation and disenchantment might have been expected to be popular in Middle English romances, but they only develop into substantial metaphors for arbitrary death and desired recov-

Goodman

ery after the Black Death. Transformation and disenchantment gave authors the opportunity to explore issues of contagion and loss, sin and retribution without directly confronting the mystery of the Black Death itself.

Finally, the portrayal of diseased and distorted female forms increases dramatically after the plague. A lack of diseased male bodies and the positive portrayal of disfigured male forms contrast vividly with the female representations at the same time period. The disfigured female form and the hideous female spell-caster come to represent the despair found in the later part of the Middle Ages. Even in this brief discussion, it is evident that the disfigured female form underscored the growing emphasis on divine punishment, as she became the metaphor for the unsaved or condemned sinner.

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¹ Some books dealing with these issues are Bynum, Kay and Rubin, and Lomperis and Stanbury.

² One effect was a shortage of labor which led to the Statute of Labourers of 1351. This statute “generate[d] a greater cohesion between the groups standing on either side of the great dividing line in society . . . and [exacerbated] the natural tensions between them” (Keen 40). As will be seen in the discussion of the Wife of Bath’s Tale these class tensions become intertwined with the depictions of body forms.

³ Body metaphors abound in mystical literature. Danielle Regnier-Bohler states, “Phenomena pertaining to the body are common in the literature: raptures, miraculous transports, instantaneous cures of horrifying diseases, resuscitations from near death” (468–69).

⁴ The *fier baiser* or “daring kiss” is found in ballads such as “Laidly Worm of Spindleston-Heugh.” It also is found in other medieval texts, such as Ulrich’s *Lanzelet*, Renaud’s *Le Bel Inconnu*, and Mandeville’s *Travels*. See Loomis and Schofield for discussions of the *fier baiser*.

⁵ *Romans of Partenay* not only contains Melusine’s transformed body form but many other distorted body forms, including the disfigurements of Raymond and Melusine’s several sons.

⁶ Romances containing imposed-changed body forms are Chaucer’s the Wife of Bath’s Tale; Gower’s “Tale of Florent”; *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *Carle off Carlile*; *The Turke and Gowin*; *William of Palerne*; *Cheuelere Assigne*; *The Romans of Partenay*; *Clariodus*; *Thomas of Erceldoune*; and *Lybeaus Desconus*.

⁷ Though neither *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* nor *Carle off Carlile* can be dated until later, their analogues come within the fifty-year time frame.

⁸ This is not to imply that there were not other influences at work in the changing descriptions of body forms in Middle English romances. However, as these shifts in body imagery parallel changes in the arts and literature, the plague’s influence cannot be ignored.

⁹ The romances which include leprosy are *Sir Beves of Hampton*; *Amis and Amiloun*; and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. The romances which contain ageing or decaying bodies are *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Watheilyn*, pt. I.

¹⁰ Chapter IV in Brody discusses Amiloun's leprosy as punishment. Also Jacques Le Goff comments on leprosy, sin, and sexuality in part three of *The Medieval Imagination*.

¹¹ Colin Platt claims that the shroud brass and cadaver effigy were not known before the pestilence (183).

¹² Another difference between the transformed females and males, although not directly related to this topic, is that the females always recognize and greet the hero-knights; the males are unaware of whom they are meeting and need to be introduced. The implication is that these female transformed creatures have supernatural powers, the same as the women who transformed them.

Goodman

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