

## “He Clothed Him and Fedde Him Evell”: Narrative and Thematic ‘Vulnerability’ in *Gamelyn*\*

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The Middle English *Tale of Gamelyn* (c. 1350) is considered a ‘problem’ romance in terms of taxonomy, and has variously been categorized as ballad, as “popular epic,” as a “Lady Meed” satire, or as a variety of proto-outlaw romance under the “Matter of Greenwood.”<sup>1</sup> The story involves the violent struggle and forest exile of young Gamelyn, after being cheated out of his land birthright by a grasping brother, to secure his position. Though an early precursor to the Robin Hood folk tales (Gamelyn ultimately morphs into the character of Will Scarlet), the tale does not seem very ‘romantic’ in that it has no love story beyond an obligatory marriage at the close, and has little conventional chivalric or aristocratic ethos permeating the narrative. Skeat (vii) posited that the story had Anglo-French origins, but no clear sources or originals have been identified

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\* This work was supported by the research fund of Hanyang University (HY-2014-N).

<sup>1</sup> Francis Child’s term, in Knight and Ohlgren’s introduction to *Gamelyn*; see also Kaeuper, 59; Keen, Chapter 1.

which might help to elucidate its purposes within a historical or cultural context.

As a brief summary: young Gamelyn overwhelms his evil brother's (John's) men but obtains a false pledge of peace; he wins himself glory and avenges a Franklin by defeating a champion in wrestling; he returns to find his home locked, overpowers the porter, and holds a festival; he is tricked into being chained by John and is rescued by Adam Spencer, who arranges a test of the visiting churchmen; when they show no mercy, Gamelyn and Adam beat them and escape into the forest; they ally with the master outlaw and his men until Gamelyn returns to answer John in assembly; his other brother Ote offers himself to bail Gamelyn; learning that his trial consists of a stacked jury, Gamelyn and his men overthrow the court, free Ote, and pronounce execution on John; the king finally pardons Gamelyn and places him and his followers into offices.

The text survives in twenty-five witnesses, though all ones of *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>2</sup> What business *Gamelyn* has in Chaucer's manuscripts has provoked lively debate, ranging from assertions that editors posthumously inserted it to supply the Cook's aborted tale, to arguments that Chaucer intended to rework the material into a tale for the Cook (or as Skeat felt, the Yeoman) and vacillated over its use for poetic or political reasons, to more fanciful hypotheses that Chaucer himself wrote it.<sup>3</sup> While not in Hengwrt or Ellesmere, both manuscripts have blank pages for its possible addition. Though far from resolved, older assumptions of *Gamelyn* as 'spurious' and non-canonical are recently challenged by interesting codicological studies that place some manuscripts contemporaneous with Chaucer, opening a door to possibilities that the poet himself was involved in editorial decisions regarding *Gamelyn*.<sup>4</sup> Harley has "icy comencera le

<sup>2</sup> For a complete list, see Rogers, 49.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent range of views, see Blake, 87-97; Bowers, 29; Thaisen, 395-415; and Vázquez.

fable de Gamelyn" ("Here the tale of Gamelyn will begin") after the Cook's Tale; was this future-tense scribble meant to indicate text presumed missing from the Cook's abrupt stop, or merely noting expected pages awaiting the completion of the tale's writing?<sup>5</sup>

As important as the matter of Chaucer's (non)connection to *Gamelyn* is, scholarship has rather obsessed over it to the detriment of examining *Gamelyn* as a literary work in itself. Other broadly New Historicist readings have tended to also mine the poem less for its content and more for its presumed cultural information, which for brevity may be divided into three foci: The poem's exposition and possible criticism of class boundaries and socioeconomic privileges; the poem's oblique replay of post-conquest Anglo-Saxon / Norman antagonisms; and the emerging interdisciplinary law-in-literature interest in how period narratives explain legal and judicial developments.

I have argued elsewhere that the critical focus on class in a similar 'male Cinderella' Northern romance, *Havelok the Dane* (c. 1285) has distracted from other matters in the poem,<sup>6</sup> as well as tending towards anachronism—the values and matériel of *Havelok* inhabit an earlier Danelaw culture and speak less to late medieval concerns with class divisions. Class issues have perhaps also dominated *Gamelyn's* analysis, with Thomas Ohlgren describing its world as one of "landlords and peasants" (xvi) and John Bowers (29-30) positing that Chaucer, himself repeatedly robbed as Clerk of the King's Works, grew disenchanted with stories of forest ruffians during the rising crime of Richard II's disorderly late reign. *Gamelyn* has

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<sup>4</sup> Mooney (97-138) asserts that *Hengwrt* and *Ellesmere* were written by Adam Pinkhurst, who might have done so under authorial supervision.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley (36) believes that Chaucer had other works "which reached the scribes before they were complete."

<sup>6</sup> For example, Halverson (145) sees the sentimentality of *Havelok* as lower-class whereas Crane sees a desire for legitimacy among the English barony and a nostalgia for their Anglo-Norman forebears. For the *Havelok* text, I use French & Hale.

been read as a yeoman and thus a freeborn commoner, but this status is not a result of blood but from being cheated out of his land heritage (Ludwikowska 67). Gamelyn is “born of a lady and gete of a knyght” (108),<sup>7</sup> has *Sir Ote* for a brother, and tells the Franklin rather imperiously to hold his steed (208). Overall the text seems less concerned with or consistent on class dynamics, peopling itself with a fairly heterogeneous social mix of minor gentry, landowners, and clerics “whose horizons are essentially local” (Kaeuper 53). Its morality endorses a natural *gentillesse* of which the Wife of Bath would approve where generosity and loyalty are truer markers of nobility.

Another branch of research has a disciplinary focus more in history, or in particular legal studies, giving rise to T.A. Shippey’s plaint that *Gamelyn* is neglected in English studies and “more often treated as a historical document” (79). Dominique Battles argues that much romance scholarship underestimates the damage wrought by the Norman takeover and the endurance of native resistance, asserting that such texts subversively replay these tensions. Thus Gamelyn has typically Anglo-Saxon features: he enters a threatening (not inviting) forest space out of loss (and not adventure-quest); he acts with a *comitatus* and not alone as an aristocratic French hero might. In response, his brother John cynically exploits the Norman imports of centralized law and primogeniture rather than respecting customary oral bonds of *treuthe*. The poet betrays a surprising legal fluency, accurately depicting the nuncupative oral will Sir John insists on to apportion his lands. Though his executors insist on impartibility, the poet explains that the lands were *purchas* (14) in “fee simple,” meaning they are bought freeholds which may be distributed as desired (Shannon 459), and the bequest generally conforms to contemporary Danelaw inheritance practice (Menuge 48). Though Gamelyn is given no authority, there is some

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<sup>7</sup> All *Gamelyn* line references are from the TEAMS edition by Knight and Ohlgren.

sense that he retains a technical ownership via perpetual wardship, as the poet repeatedly stresses the pronoun *his* lands (71-87), and Sir Ote is evidently living somewhere.

*Gamelyn* does highlight the fraternal antagonisms wrought by Norman primogeniture (Menuge 46). Nevertheless, the argument that the poem represents a wistful valorization of Germanic folk law is problematic, for *Gamelyn* does not oppose Norman religious and judicial structures as such but rather their misuse against him; the corruption he battles is "that of individuals not of systems" (Field 27), as he tells the judge "thou hast yove domes of the worst assise" (866), and hates the selfish clerics but not their stations, for "thei bene men of holy churche" (518). Although his fratricidal overthrow of the court has been harshly criticized as anything but a merry *bourde* (854), or has at best a sort of dark-humor Bakhtinian carnivality, *Gamelyn* does uphold the function of the court by trying his brother within it with "a quest of his men stronge" (874).<sup>8</sup> Later the poet praises "the king of the best sise" (885) as the king makes *Gamelyn* "the cheef justice of his free forest" (888) and gives his followers offices, with *Gamelyn* content to fill an establishment position in the feudal apparatus over his own tenants. In a subtle confirmation of the same system of primogeniture, *Gamelyn* is not given his lands by the king but is entailed through Ote, the same arrangement offered earlier by his conniving brother, but now honestly (Donnelly 343).

In stating that these four broad lenses of interpretation of *Gamelyn*—its function in terms of Chaucerian studies, its class dynamics, its purported symbolization of English/Norman antagonisms, its legal dimensions—are somehow either problematic or limiting in that they fail to address the poem as a text in itself, I realize I have merely argued what *Gamelyn* is *not*, and that more is needed. But perhaps clearing the deck will allow a fresh

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwikowska, 74; See also Lucas, 47; and Donnelly, 343.

sight of the poem, and will help resolve problems in understanding it. One interesting approach which may prove fruitful is to consider some suggestive similarities *Gamelyn* bears to the aforementioned *Havelok*. Although its first extant manuscripts are rather chronologically distant, *Gamelyn* possibly shares a Northumbrian origin from its dialect markings,<sup>9</sup> and the stories have a common rural Northern setting with folksy formulae and tags—the sheriff finds “nyst but non aye” (“the nest but no eggs,” 606), a disinherited protagonist, and plentiful fisticuffs.

Another significant linkage between the characters of *Gamelyn* and *Havelok* is how their physical strength ironically coexists with vulnerability. This is not an obvious point. Julie Nelson Couch explains that in French romance “the knight-hero retains his innate high-born identity as an invincible shield even while he constructs that identity” (331). Such is evident in the earlier and more clearly continental romances such as *King Horn* (c. 1270), where Horn is basically *internally* complete as a child, facing invading Saracens, raging seas, and King Aylmar with regal self-assurance. Similarly the protagonist in *Floris & Blancheflor* (c. 1300) emotionally matures but as a Spanish prince is never believably in a real position of weakness. Yet the *Havelok* poet stresses where *litel* Havelok is hungry or half-naked, and deploys sentimental language in dramatizing scenes where he is at the mercy of others, nearly stabbed by his usurping steward as a tot, drowned by a mercenary fisherman, or teased by athletes and soldiers as a youth, all in the service of eliciting the audience’s compassion and highlighting his transformation into a mighty king.

Couch concludes that in insular English romance “the inevitability of noble invincibility” (346) found in French texts transitions into a more sentimental and narratively powerful interest in childhood and the overcoming of an ‘underdog’ position. At a more immediate level of scene

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<sup>9</sup> See Crawford’s list, 33; and Rogers, 49-59.

construction, Nancy Bradbury asserts that this desperation/security alteration provides a powerful folkloric poetic device:

...the pathos of the mistreated child—perceived in physical terms of ragged clothing, cold, and lack of food—alternates with and is ultimately succeeded by contrasting scenes of warmth, light, “brand-new” clothing, plentiful food, accompanied by love and recognition. (140)

Thus scenes of weakness are completed by opposing binary ones of protection. Dean Hoffman points out that this symmetry even extends to the divided Anglo-Saxon line the poem uses (160). In the remaining space I would like to demonstrate that this trope of vulnerability is applicable to *Gamelyn* at an overall plot as well as a macro level. Despite his physical might, a richly thematic motif is Gamelyn’s growth from childlike weakness to strength and self-actualization as a leader.

If vulnerability in the hero does comprise a convincing trope in insular literature, it is worth asking whether there are possible historical grounds informing the conceit. Two broad trends are of interest. Chroniclers in any time period in Medieval England seldom report that everything is peachy, but both *Havelok* and *Gamelyn* appear to be written in especially turbulent environments, the former in the rebellious late reign of Henry III or early reign of Edward I, and the latter (at least in regard to Chaucer’s possible interest in the poem) in the collapsing reign of Richard II. Chaucer’s pilgrims are armed not solely for adornment but for personal safety. *Gamelyn* in particular has a revealingly dark tone. Rosalind Field notices the poem’s peculiar secularity where its hero is not overly pious and little “sense of providence” (26) guides its world. The narrative has no miracles to shepherd its characters, and like the 1380-90s poem *Athelston*, betrays a pessimism that institutions are victims of “malpractice, deceit and outright

evil" (Lucas 45)—though *Gamelyn* does retain some faith in the ability of the king to restore order, lacking in *Athelston*. Though admittedly a speculative hypothesis, themes of childlike emotional insecurity also precipitate into many twentieth-century postwar literatures, with the trope of the defenseless orphan stretching so recently as into the *Harry Potter* novels. Might *Gamelyn's* sentimental need for protection also reflect a contemporary ethos of political and economic anxiety?

A second and more concrete facet of fourteenth-century England is its population growth and socioeconomic changes wrought by increased trade and urbanization, both of which were problematizing feudal order. Strohm (5) notes that the prestige of knights was already in decline by the fourteenth century, and sees an incipient materialism in feudal relationships supplanting older sacral ties of loyalty (20-1). Gentry in the middle class strata were not always viewed as much better than the sergeant-thieves in *Havelok's* Denmark. Richard Kaeuper details contemporary cases of dishonest sheriffs, court intimidation (*maintenance*), and the suborning of jurors; the period saw an expanding application of royal law into the countryside which was apparently both welcomed and deplored for its scope for abuse (59). Langland also depicts Lady Meed riding a newly-shod sheriff to Westminster (B II.166).<sup>10</sup> Fraternal squabbles over inheritances appear prominently in fourteenth-century cases, and sometimes ended in murder (Menuge 35); audience sympathy for *Gamelyn's* legal vulnerability would have had appeal for the many younger sons disinherited (Shippey 91) or for those with experience of wardship (Menuge 15), but might have been keener for those personally victimized by the exploitation of law by the powerful. As Crane (74) remarks, it is remarkable that a story written by someone who evidently knew law has so little confidence in its ability to provide effective justice.

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<sup>10</sup> *Piers Plowman*, in Garbaty, 676-720.

Close reading may now illumine these points. Skeat etymologizes Gamelyn's name as *gamel-ing*, "son of the old man" (viii), and as with Havelok he is introduced in the story as a small child—here the poet rather beats down the adjective *young*, applying it to Gamelyn in his father's dying pleas three times in eight lines (38-46). Although the age of the "yonge knave" (70) is not stated, we learn later that "sixtene yere" (356) has passed between John's death and the poet's remarking on Gamelyn's new beard (82) as the story's conflict begins. Brother John's ensuing insolent treatment of Gamelyn after he protests "I wil not be thi coke!" (92) is telling in multiple aspects. In insulting him twice as a *gadlynge* (102, 104) there is a belittling diminutive ("little bastard") as well as a question of his birth—Shippey posits that Gamelyn might literally be a bastard as Sir John may have enjoyed too "mochel game" (4) with other women, resulting in *Game + lyn*, "love child" (87). Intensifying the slur is the situation, where John has just asked Gamelyn where his dinner is—as Skeat notes (37), in the royal *we*: "is our mete yare?" (line 90).

Couch notes that whereas romance texts usually project weakness onto the heroine, such as Horn's perpetually frantic Rimenhild, to underscore the hero's emotional or physical prowess, Havelok fulfills the role himself (Couch 336); here Gamelyn seemingly also inhabits the dependent and servile position of kitchen helper. Echoing Bradbury, Gamelyn is presented as a neglected child: brother John "clothed him and fedde him evell and eke wroth" ("clothed and fed him shabbily, and grudgingly as well," 73). Gamelyn's houses and lands share in the quality of mistreated helplessness as they are neglected, dilapidated, and exposed to plundering waste (84-7), a violation of contemporary law under multiple statutes which stated that guardians were obligated to return properties to wards in good condition (Menuge 2-3)—assuming that John's "taking into hand" (71) of Gamelyn's legacy has a contractual basis, and even this is not assured by the poet.

Despite Gamelyn's rough battering of his attackers, the poet stresses

that he remains in a position of insecurity, with a paternalistic comment on his naivety that “yonge Gamelyne no thinge he ne wist” (“young Gamelyn did not suspect anything” 167) about his false brother’s cunning after they reconcile. The lesson that a mere “show of physical strength” (Barnes 50) may be annulled by adult guile is an important one Gamelyn has not yet learned. But here the poet sets in motion a recurring structural pattern of alternating vulnerability with mercy and growth: the wrestling segment begins with the champion disdainfully asking Gamelyn “who is thi fadere and who is thi sire” (221). Yet in contrast to his brother’s lies and cynical prayers that Gamelyn “myghte breke his necke in the wrestelinge” (194), the champion plays by the rules (even his *flyting* is in a sense match ‘etiquette’) and concedes defeat by calling Gamelyn “alther maister” (“master of all,” 256) before “two gentile men” (267) award him his prize.

The second iteration of the pattern begins when Gamelyn returns home with celebrants from the match and finds the gate locked on John’s orders. Some readers have condemned Gamelyn’s homicidal response in throwing the porter down a well as extreme, for the porter does not physically threaten him.<sup>11</sup> There may be very old folklore tropes at work in the scene, for *Bevis of Hampton* has the same vignette (391-418) with a belligerent porter who is also killed. But in practical terms, the yard is Gamelyn’s home; he cannot go to a Super 8. In Anglo-Saxon literature back through to *The Wanderer*, being a homeless exile is a precarious situation, and here again Gamelyn’s vulnerability is educed. After this space the second half of the pattern is fulfilled when John’s duplicity and stinginess juxtapose against the warmth and generosity of the celebration, with surprisingly courteous and well-mannered guests. The poet remarks, “with moche solace was ther noon cheest” (“no quarreling troubled the great merriment,” 326), and like a royal wedding, the invitees stay an appropriate

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<sup>11</sup> Crawford, 39; see also Ludwikowska, 71.

time and politely take their leave (330-6).

In the third iteration of the pattern Gamelyn "stood anon allone frend had he noon" ("suddenly stood all alone without a friend," 346) in the empty yard, a portentous image. Even by the standards of romance, John's devious claim that he promised to bind Gamelyn in front of his men and must now do so perfunctorily to save face makes Gamelyn's credulity seem ridiculous. But Skeat notes that it was not unusual for the letter of an oath to be performatively fulfilled, using the example of Shylock's 'pound of flesh' codicil, though in novelized versions of *Gamelyn* the brother more plausibly ambushes him in his sleep (Skeat 42). In a largely preliterate culture visual gestures have great symbolic significance in oral oaths (Green 42); here the scene makes especial sense in the poem's economy, as for a second time Gamelyn's physical strength is nullified by his naïve trust in verbal promises, exposing him to a dangerously exposed position. In this emergency Adam Spencer offers protection, forming a child-father duo rather unlike the self-sufficient orthodox romance hero. As with *Havelok*, *Gamelyn* again uses food to match scenes of physical distress with ones of domestic security, and Adam, being the master of the pantry, performs a nurturing role as he frees him "and sette him to sopere" (421).

Critics have objected to the breach of class of Gamelyn technically making Adam a vassal but emotionally falling under his authority. Yet the poet rationalizes the relationship by indicating Adam's age difference—he has served Gamelyn's brother for sixteen years (400) and his "lockes had hore" ("hair was grey", 813). As a sort of father-figure Adam protects but also fosters Gamelyn. Geraldine Barnes notes that Gamelyn's request for "rede" (425) indexes his "progress from youth to maturity" (50) as Adam counsels a more adult course than simple reactive violence in decapitating John. Food again figures in the banquet scene, the last iteration of the pattern, where the sanctimonious priests and abbots defile their oaths of service by stuffing themselves and scolding Gamelyn as he starves nearby

in chains. The act of cruelty in Gamelyn's own home underscores the genteel chivalry of the forest men who subsequently greet him with pity and feed him (Donnelly 340-41), aided by Adam, who "toke by the honde yonge Gamelyn" (603) in guidance. A late medieval *forest* was not hostile wilderness but the trees, pasture, and hamlets which lay outside urban limits (McColly 18), and here it is a zone of "allegiance and generosity" supporting Gamelyn, in contrast to the "duplicity and brutality" of the manor (Hoffman 163).

With the master outlaw's 'retirement' from the forest, in a peaceable succession of power once more underscoring John's bad faith, Gamelyn finally completes his progress into a leader capable of giving adult advice to his own "yonge men" (789). He is given information by his tenants, who address him as *sire* (703). A setback occurs when Gamelyn is arrested at the shire meeting and requires the protection of his other brother, Ote, who offers *maynprise* (740) for him as a guarantee to the court; but Gamelyn takes a directive role for himself after his bailing and instructs Ote to "dismay you nought" (759) as he carries out his plans. Although Adam retains his role as a trusted confidant, in the climactic courtroom scene Gamelyn establishes his authority by controverting him:

And thou wilt, Gamelyn, do after my rede,  
 Ther is noon in the halle shal bere away his hede."  
 "Adam," seide Gamelyn, "we wil not do soo,  
 We wil slee the giltif and lat the other go. (815-18)

While Gamelyn's subsequent movements are not exactly Solomonic in jurisdictional wisdom, he actually counsels *less* violence than Adam does, and as with Havelok's submission of Godrich and Godard to jury trial instead of summary revenge, shows a respect for process grounded in maturity. As Menuge notes (60), if Gamelyn had abandoned Ote he would

simply be another sort of John; but Ote’s sacrificial selflessness represents an opposite morality to that of John, and at this point Gamelyn’s psychological maturity is completed in purging his brother’s narcissism from the court and himself and moving beyond merely benign self-interest toward a giving concern for others in taking a wife and position of responsibility. The narrator praises this with one of the poem’s few religious references as Gamelyn is rewarded with long life under Christ’s blessing (895).

To recap: in the scholarly interest in understanding *Gamelyn* contextually in reference to Chaucer, or in reading it chiefly to search the text for historical legal evidence, perhaps a formalist but important arena of interpretation has been missed—that the poem shares with *Havelok* an interest in evoking pity for the vulnerability of the protagonist and in dramatically juxtaposing it with later self-actualization. Ironically, despite the almost pornographic violence of Gamelyn’s combat scenes, the poet evokes in him a sentimental childlike susceptibility as a meaningful conceit, helping to soften and explain the text’s rougher edges and quirks. This may have performed a coded political critique as Battles suggests, if not a wider commentary on the social problems of England in the fourteenth century, but also reveals a literary craft in the exposition of *Gamelyn*’s satisfyingly sympathetic protagonist within the scene and plot arcs.

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**ABSTRACT****“He Clothed Him and Fedde Him Evell”:  
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The *Tale of Gamelyn* has often been read in regard to its contested association with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, or in respect to interdisciplinary concerns with class and cultural/legal issues. Less has been done to understand the poem itself. This paper builds on similar work on *Havelok the Dane* to assert that vulnerability is a key trope in *Gamelyn*. Both at the story level, where the poet evokes sympathy in Gamelyn’s growth from weakness to strength, and at scene level where the contrast between his ill and kindly treatment is highlighted, vulnerability acts as a thematic device, and recognition of this conceit will assist in understanding the poem.

**Key Words** | Gamelyn, Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, Middle English romances, Havelok the Dane, law in Literature