

Dark Nights of Romance:  
Thinking and Feeling in the Moment



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## Dark Nights of Romance: Thinking and Feeling in the Moment

CORINNE SAUNDERS



The work of Elizabeth Archibald spans many languages and many genres: Latin, French, Scots, English; history, morality, comedy, lyric and most of all romance. That recurrent interest in romance is no coincidence, for it is here, in the fiction of the Middle Ages, that medieval imagination is most evidently at work, and that Elizabeth's project of 'literary archaeology' has been most richly repaid.<sup>1</sup> Her interests in romance have been various: beginnings and endings; mothers and daughters; fellowship and strife; speech and silence; beauty and bathing; love and incest. Yet they have in common an emphasis on the disruptions, the undoings, the subversions of order, in the ways that violence, desire and error can overturn the ideal. Such disruption is the subject of her extended study of incest, but figures in many other ways across her work, seen in microcosm in violations of home and private spaces and in violence resulting from untrammelled feeling, and in macrocosm in the fall of the Arthurian kingdom. For repeatedly within romance, it is the moments of extreme difficulty, violence and suffering that provide narratives with their dramatic arc. As Northrop Frye wrote, the movement of romance is characteristically from darkness to light, disorder to order, winter to spring.<sup>2</sup> This movement is enacted in stories of test, quest, adventure, challenge, journey and homecoming, powerful human narratives that recur across times and places, gesturing towards the strength of hope in adversity and to the ways in which story is rooted in patterns. To focus on these large patterns, however, can mask romance's engagement with individual thinking and feeling in the moment, with the ways in which mind, body and affect respond to extreme experience of violent, disruptive or traumatic kinds. Nor is the pattern of hope

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford, 2001), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), 53–54, and see chapters 4 and 5, on themes of descent and ascent.

straightforward. As Elizabeth has shown in her work on incest, disorder can also often seem ominously near, and darkness, as at the end of the Arthurian legend, can return.

Contemporary models of resilience in traumatic circumstances, like Frye's model, emphasize order and emergence: coping in the face of adversity and positive outcomes, the journey from darkness to light. However, the pattern is often narrowly conceived. It is not acknowledged that resilience may be rooted within paradoxical, complex or painful states of being rather than in any straightforward kind of psychological wellbeing. By contrast, St John of the Cross's 'Dark Night of the Soul' poems, written in the late sixteenth century mainly when he was in prison, suggest that it is precisely within the places of adversity, the 'dark nights' when it is difficult or impossible to see meaning, that growth and creativity may be found. They represent ontological boundaries, leading to new states of understanding and vision. The psychoanalyst Ursula Wirtz draws parallels between medieval mystical experience and the ways in which her clients, many the victims of extreme trauma resulting from war, violence and torture, find spiritual illumination: trauma leads to 'the mystery of transformation'.<sup>3</sup> Her patterns are of dying and becoming, crisis and meaning, wounding and wisdom: patterns that evoke Jungian archetypes and myths. Trauma's 'journey to hell' can also open onto the numinous.<sup>4</sup>

These patterns find a firm grounding in the pre-Cartesian thought world of the medieval period, with its assumptions of the interconnectedness of body and mind, the role of affect in cognition, and a spiritual world view. Traumatic experience was fearful but could be sought after, effecting extremes of feeling that led to profound changes in understanding. This is most obviously exemplified in visionary writing, but is also a recurrent emphasis of romance – though a less studied one. Here too, traumatic or 'dark night' experiences lead to changed perceptions and shifts in world views, reflected in the psychological,

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Wirtz, *Trauma and Beyond: The Mystery of Transformation* (New Orleans, LA, 2014). See especially chapter 2, 'Trauma as a Spiritual Experience'.

<sup>4</sup> C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, vol. 12 (Princeton, NJ, 1968), §441, cited by Wirtz, 4. On trauma, memory and history see the influential work of Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD, 1996); and Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD, 1995). On the history of the concept of psychic trauma, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago, IL, 2000); for social, cultural, political and ethical dimensions of trauma, see Rolf J. Kleber, Charles R. Figley and Berthold P. R. Gersons, eds, *Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics* (New York, 1995).

physical and emotional responses of the protagonists.<sup>5</sup> What is particularly striking, however, is the interest of romance writers in the ways in which affect of extreme kinds is not only written in and on the body, but also shapes – and is shaped by – cognition and agency. Romance engages repeatedly with extreme, overriding feeling, as in depictions of madness and love, or of violent, invasive human or otherworldly forces. Traumatic experience is everywhere in romance. But romance narratives are also engaged with the ways these play out in the mind, with the mental effects of deep feeling and the ways that affect intersects with cognition.

Courtly, particularly French, romance offers many instances of learned fascination with inner psychology and its writing on the body, especially in the context of love. In Middle English, more ‘popular’ romance, by contrast, it is a critical commonplace that ideas of character are shaped not through the exploration of the inner psyche but by the gradual accruing of action. The exterior is privileged over the interior. Yet Middle English romances, including non-Arthurian romances, are engaged with the mind and its relations to affect and to the body, in ways that go beyond the conventional.<sup>6</sup> Although references may be brief, even cryptic, they function as a kind of shorthand, creating a texture of feeling and thought that is often essential to the pointing and interpretation of narrative. Romance writers are interested in emotion

<sup>5</sup> For ‘The Dark Night’, explaining ‘the passive purifications of both senses and the spirit’, see *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. edn (Washington DC, 1991, repr. 2017), 353–460; ‘Introduction to the Dark Night’, 353.

<sup>6</sup> On medieval models of mind, body, and affect, see also my essays ‘Voices and Visions: Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Writing’, in Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh, 2016), 411–27 (412–14); ‘Mind, Breath, and Voice in Chaucer’s Romance Writing’, in Stephanie M. Hilger, ed., *New Directions in Literature and Medicine Studies* (London, 2017), 119–41 (121–26); ‘Thinking Fantasies: Visions and Voices in Medieval English Secular Writing’, in Hilary Powell and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts* (New York, 2021), 91–116; and ‘From Romance to Vision: The Life of Breath in Medieval Literary Texts’, in David Fuller, Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, eds, *The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine: Classical to Contemporary* (New York, 2021). I am grateful to the editors for permission to draw on this work, which like research for this essay is funded by the *Hearing the Voice* project (2012–21, Wellcome Strategic Award WT098455 and Wellcome Collaborative Award, 108720/Z/15/Z), *Life of Breath* project (2014–20, Wellcome Senior Investigator Award, 103339/Z/13/Z), and a Wellcome Development Award to Durham University’s Institute for Medical Humanities (209513/Z/17/Z). This essay has been made available under the licence CC-BY-NC-ND.

and cognition, in the continuum of mind, body and affect, and the ways that extreme and traumatic external and internal forces shape being in the world.

## Medieval Models of Mind, Body and Affect

Postmodern concepts of the embodied mind, and of the role of affect in cognition, have overturned long-held ideas of mind–body dualism: yet what was radical in the recent past would not have seemed so in the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> The humoral theory that informed medieval medicine assumed the idea of the mind–body continuum: both physical and mental health depended on the balance of the four humours.<sup>8</sup> The interdependence of mind, body and affect was essential to the Galenic theory of the spirits, partly rooted in Aristotelian physiology and using a tripartite model of the soul, and developed further by thinkers following Galen, most influentially by the eleventh-century Persian philosopher–physician Avicenna (Ibn Sina).<sup>9</sup> Avicenna’s *Canon* (1037), a comprehensive compendium based in Galenic medicine but also drawing extensively on Aristotle, set out a three-part structure according to which the *pneuma* (breath) was envisaged as modified into three kinds in the three principal organs: in the liver, the ‘natural spirits’ that enabled nutrition and growth; in the heart, the ‘vital spirits’, formed of air and blood, that heated and animated the body, controlling breath; in the brain, the ‘animal spirits’ into which the vital spirits were transformed, governing sensation, movement and

<sup>7</sup> For recent neuroscientific accounts, see Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (London, 2000); and Descartes’ *Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> For general studies of medieval medicine, see Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 1998); Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud, 1995); and Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago, IL, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> See Armelle Debru, ‘Physiology’, in R. J. Hankinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Galen* (Cambridge, 2008), 263–82. Early twelfth-century Latin translations of Arabic and Greek provided the basis of Western medical theory. Particularly influential were the translations of Constantine of Africa, whose *Pantegni theorica*, translating parts of the tenth century Arabic medical encyclopaedia of ‘Haly Abbas’ (‘Alī Ibn al-‘Abbas al-Mağūsī), in turn based on Galenic works, and *Isagoge Johannitii in Tegni Galeni*, translating a treatise on the Galenic theory of humours and spirits by the ninth-century scholar and physician ‘Johannitius’ (Hunayn ibn Ishaq), became foundation texts for the *Articella* or *Ars medicinae*, the collection of six medical works that entered the university curriculum in the thirteenth century. See Vivian Nutton, ‘The Fortunes of Galen’, *The Cambridge Companion to Galen*, 355–90.

thought.<sup>10</sup> This model was fundamental to understandings of the emotions, seen as occurring through the movements of the vital spirits and natural heat within the heart. In extreme joy or anger, the vital spirits and heat moved from the heart to other parts of the body, causing the physical responses of blushing or reddening in anger. In extreme grief, distress or fear, by contrast, the vital spirits and heat withdrew from the arteries into the heart, causing pallor and, potentially, loss of breath resulting in unconsciousness or even death.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of the bodily spirits also underpinned models of perception and thought. Governed by the animal spirits, the senses, each with its own organ, were understood to be put together by the inner senses, situated in the ventricles of the brain, which were seen as the centre of both sensory and cognitive faculties. Thoughts were made up of ‘forms’ (*phantasmata*), sense impressions involving perception and response, which, according to Avicenna’s model in *De anima* (translated into Latin in the twelfth century) passed from the front cell of the brain (the inner senses and temporary memory) to the middle (the cells of imagination and cognition) to be stored at the back in the memory.<sup>12</sup> Such models of the brain allowed for the idea of an inner

<sup>10</sup> For an edition of the *Canon*, see Avicenna, *The Canon of Medicine (al-Qānūn fī’l-ṭibb)*, adapted by Laleh Bakhtiar from translations by O. Cameron Gruner and Mazar H. Shah, 5 vols (Chicago, 1999–2014). On *pneuma* / *spiritus*, see Fen [Part/Lecture] 1, Doctrina 6. A translation of Avicenna’s *Canon*, attributed, along with a range of Galenic treatises, to Gerard of Cremona (d. 1187, translator of many scientific works), probably made in the thirteenth century by Gerard de Sabbioneta (often known as / confused with Gerard of Cremona), was taken up in Toledo and introduced in the curricula of Montpellier, Paris and Bologna at the end of the thirteenth century. See Danielle Jacquart, ‘Medical Scholasticism’, in Mirko D. Grmek, ed., *Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Bernardino Fantini, trans. Antony Shugaar (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 197–240 (214–16). For a comprehensive account of Avicenna’s *Canon* with reference to Gerard of Cremona’s translation, see Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy*, ch. 2, ‘The Canon of Avicenna’, 19–40; and on the dissemination of the *Canon*, ch. 3, ‘The Canon in the Medieval Universities’, 43–76, in particular 43–47. See also Roy Porter’s discussion of classical and medieval medicine, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London, 1997), 44–134.

<sup>11</sup> On the movements of the spirits in and out of the heart, see Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven, CT, 2010), in particular chapter 2, ‘The Porous Heart’, 50–95.

<sup>12</sup> See the summary in Jacqueline Tasioulas, “Dying of Imagination” in the First Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, *Medium Ævum*, 82 (2013), 212–35 (216–17); and further Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London, 1975), 43–64; also Edwin Clarke and Kenneth Dewhurst, *An Illustrated History of Brain Function: Imaging the Brain from Antiquity to the Present*, 2nd edn (San Francisco, CA, 1996), 8–53. For the definitive work on

eye and ear, and offered explanatory paradigms for visionary experience and hearing inner voices.<sup>13</sup> They were also shaped by belief in the supernatural, and the possibility that supernatural influences might combine with physiological processes.

The intersections of mind, body and affect have been most studied in relation to affective piety, but they are equally crucial to romance writing. This is most obvious in the case of writers with a sophisticated knowledge of physiological theory. Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' exemplifies the potential complexity of the imaginative worlds of thinking and feeling. While the tale relies on the familiar conventions of love-sickness, in particular the neo-Platonic model of love striking through the eyes to wound the heart, Chaucer carefully situates Arcite's malady as an illness of the brain, a detail that distinguishes Arcite from Palamon:

... lene he wex and drye as is a shaft;  
 His eyen holwe and grisly to biholde,  
 His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde ...  
 So feble eek were his spiritz, and so lowe,  
 And chaunged so, that no man koude knowe  
 His speche nor his voys, though men it herde.  
 And in his geere for al the world he ferde  
 Nat oonly lik the loveris maladye  
 Of Hereos, but rather lyk manye,  
 Engendred of humour malencolik  
 Biforen, in his celle fantastik.<sup>14</sup>

The passage draws on medical ideas about the influence of affect on the brain, available to Chaucer through, for example, Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, translated into Middle English by John Trevisa in the late fourteenth century. Trevisa describes how the melancholy humour is evoked

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medieval memory, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 2008); Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, eds, *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002); and Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See further my essay 'Thinking Fantasies', in *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts*.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Knight's Tale', in *RC*, I.1362–76. All subsequent references to Chaucer's works are to this edition, cited by fragment and line number(s). On Arcite as 'morbidly lovesick', see Tasioulas, "Dying of Imagination", in particular 213–19.



by the passions of the soul, and works on the ‘celle fantastik’, the front ventricle of the brain controlling the imagination, to cloud the ability to judge and reason.<sup>15</sup> In such a state, the *estimatio* or evaluative cell may become overactive, repeatedly seeking from the senses images of the beloved, with the effect that heat is drawn in by the overactive brain, causing pallor and hollow eyes. This is a kind of mania or frenzy: Arcite’s inner senses return obsessively to the image of his beloved, bodying it forth again and again in his mind’s eye. Powerful affect also transforms physical appearance. Arcite takes up a mirror, to see ‘that chaunged was al his colour ... his visage al in another kynde’ (1400–01). Despite his mania, he also remains notably self-aware: his recognition of the change wrought on his body stimulates his idea of disguise. Affective extremes have both physical and mental consequences, shaping cognition and judgement, dominating the imagination, and causing physical and mental illness, in ways that closely resemble modern conceptions of the effects of trauma.

Middle English popular romances do not manifest such detailed engagement with the physiology of thought and fear. Yet here too traumatic experiences of love, loss, fear and grief play on heart and mind, and they have inevitable physical and mental consequences. The affects of love – the movement of the spirits out of and into the heart in response to strong feeling, and the consequences of that movement, especially swooning, are integral to romance’s imaginative worlds. Lines that seem formulaic and are easily passed over are also invested with realism, engaging with familiar physiology. Romances treat and play with mind, body and affect to create textures of extreme experience and offer interpretative emphases across different thematic groups: love narratives; works focused on the testing of virtue or the penitential quest; romances treating encounters with the other or faery world. In all, the dark nights of experience cause strong affects that shape cognition, will and action, and act as catalysts for transformation.

## Separation and Exile

The early Middle English romance *Floris and Blanchefleur* (c. 1250), widely known across Europe in different vernacular versions, seems least likely to engage with models of mind, body and affect in any extended way. Its focus on the love, separation and reunion of its fair, child-like lovers is archetypal; it works through binaries and symbols. Yet even here the tapestry of affect and its workings in the context of profound loss are clearly if concisely written. The

<sup>15</sup> See M. C. Seymour *et al.*, eds, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1975–88), ‘De proprietatibus cerebri’ (1, 172/31–177/26).

connection between heart and mind is pointed up: Floris's 'thought' (104) is ever on Blanche fleur, a line that is repeated, while 'Love is on his hert steke; | Love is at his hert roote' (116–17).<sup>16</sup> When he is told Blanche fleur is dead, he swoons (246); and on seeing her grave, this response is further heightened: 'Thre sithes Florys sownyde nouth; | Ne speke he myght not with mouth' (267–68); when he 'awoke' (269) from his swoon – a verb that points up the death-like effect of the spirits that move back into the heart – he weeps and sighs. The opposite affect is remarked when he hears of Blanche fleur being taken to Babylon: he 'in his hert bygan to lyght' (417). The English author adds a repetition of the line 'On Blaunche floure was al his thought' (394, 464) – pointing up the cognitive as well as the bodily aspect of love, and heightening the connection between mind, body and affect. The 'drery' countenance and 'drery ... thought' of the lovers (958, 985), alongside Blanche fleur's tears, are emphasized at the denouement, when they are threatened with death, but at the same time the emphasis shifts to their individual actions, each trying to persuade the other to take the protective ring, each attempting to take the blow of the sword first: it is not their tears but their virtuous agency that moves the Emir to pity. The responses of heart and mind to traumatic moments are carefully manipulated in relation to the plot, with swooning placed to signal extreme feeling, balanced out by the active will to save the life of the beloved.

*King Horn* (c. 1225), similarly not given to psychological exploration but rather working through patterning, repetition and symbol, demonstrates a comparable care in rendering affective play in miniature. Rymenhild's love for Horn is a celebrated example of active wooing on the part of a woman, but her experience of love is also treated in terms that suggest the dramatic play of the bodily spirits: she 'lovede so Horn child | That negh heo gan wexe wild'; 'in heorte heo hadde wo'.<sup>17</sup> The description is one of love-frenzy or madness, occasioned by the affect experienced in the heart; the urgent movement of the spirits outwards causes frenzy, whereas at her rejection by Horn they withdraw into the heart and she falls in a swoon (428). The dramatic play of affect is balanced by her demonstration of agency on waking from the swoon, as she promises to dub Horn knight. In grief at her loss of Horn, that withdrawal of spirits is again evident. In response to her warning dream she sits 'also he were of [out of] witte' (652); she falls swooning to the ground at his departure (740); and at her enforced marriage again sits weeping and 'ase heo were of

<sup>16</sup> *Florys and Blaunche flour*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London, 1993), lines 104, 116–17. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

<sup>17</sup> *King Horn*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, lines 251–52, 263. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

[out of] witte' (1086). The deathly movement of the spirits into the heart is made explicit: her heart 'bigan to chelde' (1150) when she thinks Horn dead. But it is the affects of the heart too that inspire extreme action – her wooing of Horn, but also her plan to kill her unwanted husband and herself, carefully thought out with a knife concealed under the bed. Affect shapes cognition and action, rather than these being in opposition.

The same pattern occurs in *Bevis of Hamtoun*, where the conventions of love-sickness are balanced by an emphasis on virtuous thought, both in Josian, another actively wooing woman, and in Bevis, who is carefully directed throughout the romance toward 'ri3t'. Chrétien tells us that Love and Reason are at war, but in these works this is by no means the case. Rather, extremes of emotional experience bring about reasoned choice.

### Suffering Virtue

In the early examples of *Floris and Blanchefleur* and *King Horn*, extremes of experience are rooted in exile, love and separation, responses to which elicit the play of bodily spirits and the shaping of thought. Across the period, such engagement with the intersection of mind, body and affect is sustained and developed, as exemplified by the calumniated queen pattern of the late fourteenth-century *Sir Tryamour* and the *Erl of Toulous*. In *Sir Tryamour* spontaneous affect plays a crucial part in the portrayal of the queen's virtue, by contrast to the dissembling of the steward who accuses her of adultery. Her response is extreme as she swoons on her steed (254), evoking pity in those who look on; Sir Roger's death is mirrored in the flight of spirits into her heart, causing her to swoon again in sorrow (375): she has 'grete mornynge in hur herte' (397).<sup>18</sup> This stable characterization in answer to traumatic experience is set against the shifting responses of the king, whose feeling on discovering the truth realigns mind and body, connecting with his cognitive processes the affect that he expresses early on, 'For sorowe my herte brekyth in sondyr' (200). On realizing he has been betrayed by the steward, he 'syttyth ... in a thoght' (507) and articulates the powerful affect of his realization, 'For sorowe y wyll now dye' (597). As he 'thenkyth' (608) of the death of Sir Roger and of his pregnant queen, he swoons (612) – and that loss of breath marks his internalization of her innocence. But the denouement also carefully notes the king's thought. As he looks on the queen, 'hym thoght that he schulde hur have seene'; 'style he satt in thoght' (1640, 1650): mind, body and affect are explicitly connected. Though the reunion emphasizes joy and gladness, the

<sup>18</sup> *Syr Tryamour*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, lines 254, 375, 397. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

focus of this romance is on the affects of grief and the movements of the mind in response to extreme suffering, and these in turn shape the affective power of the narrative on the reader.

In the *Erl of Toulous* (c. 1400), affect must be very delicately realized in order to protect the lady Beulybon, wife of the Emperor, and the Earl from the suspicion of illicit desire. From the start, this work probes misguided affect, expressed in the Emperor's grief at his losses in his wrongful battle against the earl. The lady, by contrast, is established as making clear cognitive moral judgements: 'Ye have the wronge and he the ryght' (154).<sup>19</sup> In the same way, corrupt and innocent love are set against each other: feeling is understated and honourable in the Earl and the Empress, by contrast to the excessive love-sickness of the two knights who betray her, who are described as 'pale ... of blee' (495, 641), fading 'all away', drooping and pining, their 'wytt ... all away' (554). Moral judgement is carefully pointed: the Emperor has a warning dream of wild bears tearing his wife and, as 'a wytty man' (811), his heart is directed to 'care' and doubt about her safety (805–13). As a kind of divine intervention on behalf of the Empress, the dream is powerfully affective, yet it also requires interpretation and action, which are not sustained by the Emperor. By contrast, the 'pyte' of the Earl (915) leads to his defence of Beulybon. The placing of feeling is also crucial: while much is made of her woe, reflected in her swoon, and of the Earl's 'morn[ing] nyght and day' (919), no affective detail is given regarding their eventual reunion and marriage. The affect that overcomes mind and body to convey innocence, virtue in suffering and pity, and to catalyse action, is approved, whereas affect that might suggest illicit desire is disallowed. The final emphasis is on the power of virtue and truth within the context of traumatic displacement and threat to spiritual and bodily integrity.

The care with which affect is treated recurs in the Constance story and its analogues: in their explorations of virtue naturalness of affective response is crucial, but so also is steadfastness. In Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale', the image of Custance's 'deedly pale face' (II.822) haunts the narrative: 'Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face?' (II.645). In distress at the sight of the murdered Hermengyld, Custance's vital and animal spirits withdraw: 'For verray wo hir wit was al aweye' (II.609). Yet Chaucer is careful to emphasize Custance's agency: 'So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute' (II.651); on the sea, 'she taketh in good entente | The wyl of Crist' (II.824–25). It is at her reunion with Alla that she manifests the most extreme physical affect of tears and swoons, evoking a

<sup>19</sup> *The Erle of Tolous*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, line 154. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

similar response in him, and signalling a return to natural order: affect released by justice. *Emaré* (also late fourteenth century) offers a version of the story that (fittingly in the context of this volume) does not write out incestuous desire and that heightens affect.<sup>20</sup> Here too this is carefully executed: the poignant image of Emaré on the sea, so overcome in mind and body by sorrow that ‘ever lay she styll’ on the ship, is introduced by the extended description of the Emperor’s penitence, experienced in ‘thought’ but also in body, in his lashing tears; as he stands ‘yn studyng’, he falls to the ground swooning.<sup>21</sup> His grief at his own action is represented as overwhelming in affective and intellectual terms, rewriting the desire that overcomes ‘all hys hert and all hys thowghth’ (223). This work introduces a supernatural element in the exotic mantle that turns Emaré into a ‘glysteryng thyng’ (350), ‘non erdly thyng’, a creature of faery (396). The robe seems to make material the effects of desire, rendering Emaré what she seems in the eyes of the desirer, an extraordinary, glittering, otherworldly being.

The destructive potential of extreme affect is exemplified in both the Emperor and the jealous mother-in-law, by contrast to the king, whose desire for Emaré, so extreme that he cannot eat (400–01), is positively written in marriage. The king’s response to the message that his child is a monster demonstrates the virtuous intersection of mind, body and affect: he falls swooning in sorrow, lamenting that Jesus should have sent a ‘fowle lothly fende’ (563) to come between him and his wife, but also sends letters commanding the protection of Emaré. Profound affect is dangerous when misplaced, but it also inspires virtuous action, most obviously in the response of Emaré herself to her exile: though she manifests ‘sory herte’, ‘karefull herte’, and ‘sykyng sore’ (662, 676), she is depicted as ‘meke and mylde’ (640), praying as well as lamenting, and singing a lullaby to her child. Similarly, the king’s grief, expressed in ‘hevy chere; | Wyth karefull hert and drury mone’, sighs and tears (807–13), is balanced by and inspires the ‘thowght [that] yn hys herte come’ (817), the idea that his lady has drowned for him, necessitating a penitential journey to the Pope, the journey that will reunite him with Emaré.

Overwhelming affect is left until the reunion, which is depicted, as in ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’, in terms of the literally breath-taking play of spirits that betokens deeply felt, spontaneous emotion: ‘for joy they sowened, both to’ (935); the ‘all pale’ Emperor too is revived from sorrow (1009). They are at last

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of father–daughter incest stories, see Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 145–91.

<sup>21</sup> *Emaré*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London, 1973), lines 330, 280–85. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

‘kevered of cares colde’ (945): warmth and life can return. As in Shakespeare’s romances (Marina in *Pericles*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*), these works chart the workings of traumatic actions and events on the virtuous women around whom they revolve and who are animated by the textures of thought and feeling evoked in response to those dark nights. In all of them, the shift away from an emphasis on overwhelming affect at particular moments is crucial, signalling the innocence and virtue of their protagonists – a rewriting of the moments where affect shapes agency.

### Penance and Grace

The so-called ‘penitential romances’ engage most directly with the transformative spiritual power of traumatic experience in their treatments of the movement from penitence to grace. Moments of conversion are particular foci. In *Guy of Warwick* (c. 1300) this moment is briefly recounted and fully naturalized: after living in joy for only fifteen days with Felice, Guy returns home from hunting and ascends a tower to see ‘pat firmament, | Pat thicke wiþ steres stode’ and think ‘On Iesu omnipotent, | Pat alle his honour hadde him lent’, whereas he has never served Jesus in return.<sup>22</sup> While the moment of thought is key, this is a romance that treats such interior reflection only briefly, externalizing virtue by writing it on the body in Guy’s many battles and in the miracles that affirm his virtue. In *Sir Isumbras* (early fourteenth century), by contrast, the processes of inner thought that accompany feeling are treated more extensively. The catalyst for Isumbras’s redemptive quest is explicitly supernatural, ‘a stevenne’, sent by God to Isumbras in the form of a singing bird which offers the choice of suffering in youth or age, and the ensuing tale of providential intervention, marvel and miracle does not seem to deal in realism.<sup>23</sup> Yet precise care is taken in the writing of affect on mind and body. The bird’s voice provokes in Isumbras ‘carefull herte and sykyngne sore’ (55) and ‘drurye’ (68) spirit, ‘pleye’ turned to ‘peyne’ (78), while much of the rest of the romance focuses on steadfastness in suffering, and ultimately on the power of pity and generosity. Thus when Isumbras sees his naked, grieving children, fled from his burning house, ‘Yette changed nothyng his ble’ (109); he urges against excessive weeping, for their sorrows result from sin. Similarly, his lady urges the children to be ‘blythe’ (112) because their father lives. The ‘drewrye mode’ (129) that accompanies Isumbras’s covering of his naked wife

<sup>22</sup> *The Romance of Guy of Warwick: The First or 14th-Century Version*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS es 42, 49, 59 (London, 1883, 1887, 1891), stanza 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Sir Isumbras*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, line 42. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

and children with his own clothing is complemented by prayer and active penance – by contrast to the extreme grief of all who see the family begging for food and the pity even of the heathen king, who thinks the lady ‘an angell ... | Komen out of hevenne that day’ (275–76). Her weeping and three swoons are carefully placed as caused by her separation from children and husband and are set against her ‘meke and mylde’ demeanour (340). Affect is extreme, causing the spirits to withdraw, but is also always tempered by virtue: the texture of ‘sorrow and care’ that pervades the story as one suffering is replaced by another is carefully shaped to emphasize the power of prayer, faith and virtuous action, and ultimately to prove the benign workings of providence, directly articulated in the visitation to Isumbras by ‘an angell bryghte’ in response to his tears of anguish. Emotions are consuming and bodily but also shaped by cognitive processes. The narrative plays with the shaping power of memory: upon Isumbras’s discovery of the griffin’s nest containing the gold and the scarlet mantle that were his wife’s, ‘His sorowe he hadde in mynde’ (627); the mindful grief that keeps him in his chamber, in turn, leads to the discovery of the gold, and the lady’s own swoon of recollection (650). The affects of sorrow are finally replaced by the swoons and tears of joy and the reunion of the family.

Affect is given a new turn of the screw in *Amis and Amiloun* (late thirteenth century), which presses to their limits the motifs of testing, penance and virtuous reward. Here trauma is intensely physical: the leprosy of Amiloun and its cure through the killing of Amis’s children. Exterior and interior are connected from the start through the physical likeness that mirrors the deep friendship of Amis and Amiloun and the beauty that reflects their virtue. Bonds between them are psychic and physical: Amis dreams his friend is attacked by wild beasts in the forest, to discover him in despair; and Amis’s claim that he has contracted ‘a malady that mengeth al [his] blod’ in order to avoid sleeping with the wife of the friend whose place he has taken is eerily fulfilled in Amiloun’s actual leprosy.<sup>24</sup> Amiloun’s wrongful taking on of his friend’s battle is depicted in terms that emphasize the workings of intellect and feeling as Amiloun places love and duty above the prophetic warning he hears. No physical details of his leprosy are offered beyond the statement that ‘Also that angel hadde him told, | Fouler messel thar nas non hold | In world than was he’ (1543–45). The focus is rather on contrasting affective responses to leprosy: whereas Amiloun’s wife rejects him, the selflessness of Amis’s wife is manifest in her greeting kiss: ‘As foule a lazer as he was, | The levedi kist him in that plas’ (1261–62); she bathes and clothes him, just as ‘Amoraunt’ (Childe Owain) physically cares for him ‘fro fot to hond’ (1631). Here again, spontaneity of

<sup>24</sup> *Amis and Amiloun*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, lines 1173–74. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

generous feeling marks Christian virtue. The reunion scene similarly recounts the rush of spirits – the tears and swoons of profound emotion (2158–60) – but thought and memory are also present: Amis and his wife ‘were him [Amiloun] bothe ful minde’ (2181).

In the denouement, this combination of thought and feeling is essential, as body and blood are sacrificed to purify body and blood through the killing of Amis’s children, which evokes but goes several steps further than Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Dream both authorizes the act and reiterates the deep connection between Amis and Amiloun. Strikingly, this visionary experience is presented intellectually: for three nights, Amis ‘in slepe thought as he lay’ (2187) that he sees an angel who reveals that the blood of the children will cure his friend; Amiloun is similarly ‘warned’ by an angel (2210). While Amis’s killing of the children is presented in highly affective terms, cognition and judgement are also emphasized: his turning away in sorrow and ‘wepe[ing] with reweful chere’ (2280) as he looks on the beauty of the children are balanced by his articulation of the ‘gret rewethe’ (2276) of killing them, his extended argument concerning his brother’s sacrifice, and his prayer. The combination of feeling and reason shapes the ‘dreri mode’ (2294) in which he cuts their throats and collects their blood to anoint Amiloun; crucial too is Amiloun’s exclusively affective response of horror. By contrast, despite Amis’s wife’s ‘wo’, she exhibits steadfastness: ‘Sche comfort him ful yare’; ‘Yif it ware at min hert rote, | For to bryng thi brother bote, | My lyf y wold not spare’ (2379, 2383–85). The patterning is clear: the children’s innocent blood, like Christ’s, restores the sufferer, and the sacrifice, deeply disturbing as it is, functions to prove Amis’s love for his friend above himself, re-enacting the Saviour’s sacrifice for humankind. Virtue of course is rewarded: the children are miraculously restored ‘Without wemme and wound’ (2406), and the affects of joy combine with prayer. But it is the dramatic conflicts of thought and feeling that colour the narrative. These ‘dark night’ explorations of love, compassion and charity, in which the inner self is so visibly and dramatically written on the body, take the processes of cognition and affect to their extremes, probing oppositions and paradoxes, but also showing the crucial roles of both feeling and thought in choice and agency. The patterns of testing, sacrifice, penance, steadfastness and miracle interweave, treated in ways that demand the interplay of body and mind, affect and cognition.

### Otherworldly Interventions

Encounters with the otherworld offer romance writers compelling possibilities of exploring extreme, often traumatic experience. The faery works in part to personify desire: positively, for example, in Marie de France’s *lai* of *Lanval*



and Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*; more disturbingly in *Sir Degarré* with its rape of a princess by a faery knight, and *Sir Gowther* with its rewriting of the faery knight as the devil. Most complex is *Sir Orfeo* (c. 1300), where the intervention of the supernatural eerily disturbs body, mind and affect. Heurodis wakes from her sleep beneath an 'ympe-tree' to recount a strange invasion of her psyche – her encounter with the King of Faery, described as a real event but, disturbingly, experienced as she sleeps, a multi-sensory vision into which she dramatically enters.<sup>25</sup> The episode suggests the menacing power of the supernatural to invade the self, and the violence of the King of Faery's summons is violently enacted by Heurodis in the mutilation of her own body, an extraordinary evocation of the loss of sanity effected by trauma:

Ac as sone as she gan awake,  
 She crid and lothly bere gan make;  
 She froted hir honden and hir feet  
 And crached hir visage – it bled wete.  
 Hir riche robe hie all to-rett  
 And was reveysed out of hir wit. (53–58)

As Heurodis recounts her experience, however, frenzy, the rushing out and loss of wits, is replaced by the affects of grief, and it is grief that colours the unfolding of the narrative as, despite the guard of a thousand armed knights, she is 'taken' into faery: 'Tho was ther crying, wepe, and wo! | The King into his chaumber is go | And oft swooned opon the ston | And made swiche diol and swiche mon' (171–74). Orfeo's grief at the loss of his wife is written on his body as he flees into the forest, becoming a Wild Man figure. Yet here the physical enactment of grief is a conscious choice: Heurodis wakes in madness but Orfeo elects to lead a life of exile, leaving his steward to rule in his stead; mind and body are consciously aligned with the affective experience of grief. The story implies though it does not make explicit the notion that physically enacted penitence, abstinence and self-denigration are rewarded with healing grace, for it is in this state of exile that Orfeo, his kingly body unmade, catches sight of the faery hunt. Again, thought and feeling coincide as Orfeo's laughter at the recollection of the past, triggered by the hunt, proves the affective turning point. As in the Orpheus myth, the power of music, which connects mind, body and affect in its making, also connects them in those listening, overcoming separation and death. The conclusion moves to very different affects – those of the steward and court at the return of their king – written

<sup>25</sup> *Sir Orfeo*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (Exeter, 1986), line 46. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited parenthetically by line number(s).

in the joyous frenzy of the steward, who overthrows tables and chairs. But again, these are the reward of virtuous action, the fruits not just of feeling but of long-held faith and thoughtfulness. The body of Heurodis, seized and unmade through the sinister, unruly forces of desire, is regained, remade through Orfeo's virtuous love; Orfeo's kingly body is restored through the loyalty of his steward. Yet it is Heurodis's madness and mutilation, her uncanny disappearance, and the sinister images of bodies caught in the throes of violent death in the world of faery that we retain. This tale of bodies is also one of the overthrow of minds, set against the power of deep feeling to transform reality, and the profound human longing for the return of those lost in death.

Romance treatments of mind, body and affect at traumatic moments, then, go far beyond convention. Explorations of the continuum of mind and body and the deep connections between affect and cognition draw on contemporary physiological models, and on late medieval interest in psychology and the processes of thought. This understanding of the continuities between and interdependence of thought and feeling, of the bodiliness of being, and of being subject to powerful affective forces from within and without, allows romance writers to probe in creative and original ways the topics of emotion, intellect and agency, the constraints placed by affect on individual free will, but also the powerful possibilities presented by extreme feeling and its influential role in processes of cognition. Such literary archaeology, in the spirit of Elizabeth Archibald, allows us, as she has led the way in doing, to look beyond ready assumptions concerning medieval fictions, to see their sophistication, realism and imagination, their animating textures of mind, body and affect, and the ability of their 'dark nights' to speak to our understandings of extreme experience.