The Knight of Curtesy and the lady of Faguell (London: William Copland, [1556]; STC 24223)

This anonymous romance, printed in 1556 by William Copland, represents the earliest surviving example in English of a tale which was widespread in Europe in the medieval and early modern periods. The first and best-known version was set down in the thirteenth century by the otherwise unknown 'Jakemon Sakesep' in the Picard romance Le Chatelain de Couci et La Dame de Fayel, and analogues of the tale have been noted in sources as diverse as Punjab folklore and the legendary tales associated with the Germanic minnesingers, where the story was associated with Renimar von Brennenberg. Although the Knight of Curtesy represents the earliest version in English, the similarity between this tale and The Squire of Low Degree, another romance printed by Copland in the 1550s, was noted by Mead in his edition of that text. The Knight of Curtesy also belongs, more widely, to a group of folkloric tales which share the motif of the 'eaten heart'.

Copland specialised in printing Protestant literature, including sermons and translations of continental texts, before the death of Edward VI and the accession of Mary in 1553 began to reverse the changes imposed by the Edwardian and Henrician reformers and forced printers who had previously marketed Protestant texts to look for titles less antagonistic to the Marian government. Copland had inherited his printing business from Robert Copland, who is thought to be his father, and who had worked with Wynkyn de Worde on the first printed versions of many English romances in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and after 1553 Copland turned to these romances to fill the gap in his print runs. The chivalric tales, most of which had not been printed for more than thirty years, seem to have proved an enormous success: Copland issued a large number of them during Mary's reign, and continued to do so after Elizabeth came to the throne. Books by Copland formed the majority of the famous romance library of Captain Cox who appeared, with his books as his social signifier, at the royal entertainment at Kenilworth in 1575. Many of these texts represented significant investments on the part of the printer, especially thick tomes such as Malory's Morte D'Arthur and Henry Watson's translation of Valentine and Orson. Others, however, required less outlay from the consumer, and represented an early attempt to market recreational literature to the less wealthy reader. The Knight of Curtesy describes itself as a 'treatise', and only runs to twenty pages which, with the one crude and generic woodcut adorning its title-page, would have been cheap to produce. Furthermore, as the blessing at the close of the text suggests, the simple language and formulaic imagery of the text would have made it suitable for oral performance as well as for literate audiences, both 'reders and herers' (sig. B*ii').

The story itself represents a conventional romance conflict between the husband and the lover, between the social contract of marriage and the emotional contract of courtly love. The story does, however, share several extraordinary features with the other 'eaten heart' tales of its kind, as well as exhibiting some unique characteristics of its own, which may have become even more prominent and poignant in the context of the return of romance under the Marian counter-reformation after the long exile promoted by humanist disdain and the distractions of the religious controversies of the two decades preceding Mary's accession. The story can be briefly summarised:

1. See John E. Matzke, 'The Legend of the Eaten Heart', Modern Language Notes 26/1 (1911), 1–8, in JSTOR.
2. See The Squire of Low Degree: A Middle English Metrical Romance, ed. W.E. Mead (Boston: Ginn, 1904). For more recent editions, see Middle English Verse Romances, ed. Donald B. Sands (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986, repr. 2003), pp. 249–78. The sixteenth-century editions are Here begynneth undor your dore (STC 23111.5; London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1520), and The squre of low dgre [sic] (STC 23112; London: William Copland, [c. 1560]). For a description of the similarity between the two romances, see Mead and Bernard L. Jefferson, 'A Note on the Squre of Low Dregre', Modern Language Notes, 28/4 (1913), 102–3, in JSTOR.
3. For a description of the characteristics of this group (AT 922) and its variants, see David Blamires, 'An English Chapbook Version of the "Eaten Heart" Story', Folklore 104:1 (1993), 99–104, in JSTOR.
4. See Helen Cooper, The English romance in time: transforming motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the death of Shakespeare (Oxford: OUP, 2004), appendix, pp. 409 ff., for a complete summary of the known printings, adaptations, and references to medieval romances after 1500. Important among Robert Copland's works which may have attracted William Copland to have continued his involvement with romance are the translation of The knight of the swanne (STC 7571, 7571.5; London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1512 and c. 1522), attributed to Robert Copland, which William Copland reprinted c. 1560 (STC 7572); and his translation of Ipomysdon (STC 5732.5; London: Wynkyn de Worde, c. 1522), which William Copland is not known to have reprinted.
5. See Robert Laneham (or Langham), A letter wherein part of the entertainment vntoo the Queenz Maiesty at Killingwoorth Castl in Warwik sheers in this soomerz progress 1575 is signified (STC 1855.05; London: s.n., 1575), pp. 34–5; and R.J.P. Kuin, Robert Langham, a Letter (Leiden: Brill, 1983).
7. References to the prices of romances in evidence surviving from the sixteenth century suggest that they may have been extremely cheap to purchase: see A.S.G. Edwards, 'William Copland and the Identity of Printed Middle English Romance' in Phillipa Hardman, ed., The Matter of Identity in medieval Romance (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002).
9. See Robert Crowley's supplement to Thomas Lanquet's Epitome of Chronicles (STC 15217.5; London: William Seres for Thomas Marsh, 1559), sig. ccccf. It may also be of interest, given Copland's printing of the romance, that Robert Copland had translated a history of the Knights Hospitallers, which included an account of the fall of Rhodes in 1522: The begynnyng and foudacyon of the holy hospytall, [and] of the ordre of the kyghtes hospitallers of saynt Johan baptyst of Jerusalem (STC 15050;
In the country of Faguell, there lives a lord whose lady is loved by all for her virtue. A knight also lives there, who for his valour is known as the Knight of Courtesy, and resolves to be his paramour, not physically, 'but in chastlyte / As chyldren that together are kynde' (sig. Aii v), a desire which the knight shares. The Lady overhears the knight’s amorous laments in the garden below her chamber, and they resolve to live in chaste faithfulness to each other. However, their vows are overheard and reported to the Lord, who advises the knight to go in search of adventures rather than staying at home. He agrees, and the sorrowful Lady gives him a lock of her hair. The knight departs and, vowing not to fight Christians, decides to go to Rhodes. This decision is temporarily forgotten however whilst he takes a detour to Lombardy, where he defeats a dragon, before resuming his journey towards Rhodes, where he is welcomed to the besieged city (sig. Bii v). Meanwhile, the Lady mournfully suspects that her Lord has connived to send the Knight to his death, and protests that their love was chaste. The battle begins on Rhodes, and the Knight performs valiant feats before being surrounded and mortally wounded – among other places, in the heart – by the Saracens. Before he dies, he makes his page promise to cut out his heart and carry it, wrapped in the hair of the Lady, to her, burying the rest of his body ‘in the crosse waie’. The page does his bidding and heads for Faguell, but meets the Lord on his way and reveals the Knight’s demise and his token. The Lord takes the heart to the castle and gives it to his cook, instructing him to prepare it. At table the heart is presented to the Lady, and she happily eats it, unaware of its origins. The Lord then reveals that it is the heart of the Knight, and the Lady retires to her chamber. She confesses, takes the sacrament, and lays down to die. She chides her husband for his actions, and he repents, claiming he did not know what the consequences would be. She forgives him and protests her chastity and ‘cleanliness’ with regards to the Knight of Courtesy and all other knights except him. She repeats that she will eat no more as the heart ‘is buryed in mi bodye’, and dies. The narrator hopes that God will receive her into heaven, and hopes the same for the ‘readers and herers of this treatyse’.

The consumption of internal organs – especially the heart – as a motif which suggests the transference of power or other qualities is common, and can be seen in the classical story of the Titans’ attempt to consume Dionysus. Their failure to eat the heart allows the god to be reformed from this organ. The use of the motif is here complicated, however, by the fact that the consumption is involuntary, and is clearly associated in the mind of the Lady with the flesh of Christ as consumed in the sacramental wafer, as well as participating in a complex metaphor of last rites and burial. Other details of the romance, such as the cryptic request of the Knight to be buried at the ‘cross waie’ and the repeated insistence that the battle to which the Knight must travel being at Rhodes, rather than the more common and general ‘Holy Land’ (which is the destination in Le Chatelain de Couci) may suggest that, far from being a simply a generic romance, the Knight of Curtesy may contain plot elements and motifs which were delicately sensitive to sixteenth-century concerns about transubstantiation and to the contemporary conflict with the Ottoman Empire over the island of Rhodes. The feeling that these elements remain as evidence of an earlier version in which their significance was more evident is further increased by the perfunctory treatment given to the normal elements of the romance. The confession of love between the Knight and the Lady, the eavesdropping by a malicious spy, and the eventual betrayal by the husband did not seem to excite the attention of the balladeer. Indeed, the husband seems to be forgiven with remarkable haste for feeding his wife her paramour’s heart. Apart from the obvious and gruesome appeal of the central cannibalistic episode, the elements on which the balladeer repeatedly insists could also give us some clue as to the chord that the poem may have struck with its 1550s audience. If the Knight’s destination was changed for a specifically sixteenth-century version of the romance, the choice of Rhodes as a location for a united Christian effort against the Saracens would have been an obvious one. The island base of the Knights Hospitallers had been lost to Ottoman forces on Christmas Day 1522, and represented an obvious target for a resurrected union of Christian forces if the Marian counter-reformation proved permanent. The Hospitallers had been officially dissolved in 1540, and whilst the Marian regime showed no sign of restoring property confiscated under Henry VIII, it nevertheless held the promise of the return of religious orders such as the Hospitallers.
The burial motif would also have been a contentious one for readers undergoing the Marian restoration of Roman practice. The Lady makes constant parallels between the flesh of her lover which she has consumed, and the flesh of Christ with which she has overlayed it, bringing the reality of transubstantiation to the fore. The notion that she must not touch anything after the final sacrament, and that the flesh and earth are re-united in the three-way metaphor of Christ buried in her, her lover buried in her, and her buried in the church (which was the bosom of Christ), would have been full of anxiety for the Marian subject. Not only would those with Catholic leanings be aware of this resurrection of traditional mysteries, but also those committed to the reformed church would have been given plenty of ammunition – in the hair which wraps the heart, the cannibalism, and the burial of the Knight ‘in the cross-waie’ – against the ‘popish’ romance with its characteristic tinge of sympathetic magic.

There are other features of the romance which would requite further investigation: the lovers’ vows in the garden, for example, mirror the marriage vows, but it is difficult to tell whether they represent a memory of any particular sacral conventions, or simply a more generalised ceremony. Whilst not the finest example of romance in its popular, ballad form, The Knight of Curtesy is nevertheless a goldmine for students of sixteenth-century readerly practice.

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