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# The Subversion of Meaning in Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*

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The prologue to Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*<sup>1</sup> (c. 1180) places the story of the eponymous hero squarely in the tradition of the *romans d'antiquité*, firstly by invoking 'les aventures/ Ke avyndrent a l'ancien tens' (ll. 4-5), and secondly by presenting the text as a translation from Latin into the vernacular (ll. 20-32). Like the romances of *Thèbes* and *Troie*, and like other works which respond directly to them, such as the *Lais* of Marie de France and the anonymous romance *Partonopeus de Blois*, *Ipomedon* begins with an invitation to the audience/reader to construct meaning from the narrative which is to follow: 'Qui a bons countes voet entendre,/ Sovent il poet grans biens aprendre' (ll. 1-2).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, an implicit contrast is established between stories of the ancient world and works of pure entertainment, through the linking of the paired terms *enveiseüres* and *aventures* with the binary opposition *folie/sens*:

Par escuter enveiseüres  
Et retrere les aventures  
Ke avyndrent a l'ancien tens,  
Poet l'en oÿr folie e sens.  
Or lessums la folie ester  
Kar de sens fet mult bien parler.       (3-8)

The text clearly identifies itself with the second in each pair of terms, and by the use of the polyvalent term *sens* appears to promise its readers not only a window on the wisdom of the ancients but also meaning, or a 'message' of its own. It is hardly surprising, then, that modern critics have responded to this invitation to construct meaning by proposing a variety of interpretations of the work.

Before the publication of Holden's edition, a number of scholars had proposed serious readings of the text, seeing it either as a tale of protracted atonement for neglect of chivalric prowess,<sup>3</sup> or, conversely,

a critique of excessive observance of knightly conventions.<sup>4</sup> Holden shifted the focus towards the burlesque elements in the text, and saw it as essentially parodic, its *sens* being little more than the comic debunking of literary conventions.<sup>5</sup> For him, one of the hallmarks of *Ipomedon* was the arbitrariness of its attacks on the sacred cows of romance writing: 'La seule intention systématique et tant soit peu sentie qu'on puisse y déceler est celle de satiriser la femme' (p. 55). The publication of the new edition provided the impetus for several more studies which all focused to a greater or lesser degree on the interpretative challenge posed by Hue's complex mode of composition. Michel Stanesco attempted to make sense of the hero's contradictory behaviour by attributing it to the interference of mythical or magical modes of narration with romance.<sup>6</sup> Susan Crane's fine study drew attention to the coexistence of paradoxical elements in the story, and gave due weight to humour and irony, but nonetheless saw the author as having a 'serious commitment to his material'.<sup>7</sup> A similar 'double reading' approach was adopted by William Calin, who saw *Ipomedon* as simultaneously subverting and validating the romance enterprise.<sup>8</sup> Roberta Krueger noted the existence of 'the implied reader awaiting the disclosure of the story's *sens* and the clever narrator who refuses to reveal it', while concluding that part, at least, of that *sens* lay in a demonstration of 'male ingenuity at the expense of women'.<sup>9</sup> Despite their incisive analyses of the poem and appreciation of Hue's use of paradox and contradiction, Crane, Calin and Krueger still implicitly accept the prologue's suggestion that there is a *sens* to be recovered from the story: the text simply requires clever readers to match its clever narrator and uncover what is being concealed. The contention here will be, on the other hand, that *Ipomedon* is a text which deliberately sets out to make it impossible for the reader to construct meaning: its *sens* is the willed absence of *sens*.<sup>10</sup> The process of thwarting our attempts to respond to the prologue's invitation is certainly comic and subversive, as Holden argues, but it is far from being arbitrary. What we experience as readers of this text is the systematic blocking of every avenue of interpretation by the sustained marshalling of red herrings, internal contradictions, and logical conundrums.

Red herrings are found from the opening scenes of the poem onwards. When the hero decides to leave his father's court in order to broaden his education, the audience is encouraged to expect serious opposition to the plan from king Hermogenés. *Ipomedon* explains to

his tutor Tholomeu that his father loves him so much that he would never give him leave to go, no matter who might make the request on his behalf. The young man even pictures himself having to creep away under cover of darkness in order to fulfil his dream (ll. 253-66). The audience is thus led to anticipate an early test for the hero, and awaits the narration of a scene in which Ipomedon either defies his father or succeeds against the odds in winning him round. In the event, we get neither: Tholomeu puts the plan to the king, who takes only one octosyllable to give his consent:

Tholomeu ne s'est pas targié,  
 Al roi vint si li ad prié,  
 La reïne tut ensement;  
 Ly rois l'otrie bonement;  
 A la reyne mut pesa,  
 Mout a envis luy graanta  
 Ke sis fiz deüst esloignier;  
 El n'ot for ly sul, si l'ot cher. (297-304)

The opposition, such as it is, comes from a different quarter, but even the queen is rapidly persuaded to agree. Her reluctance is understandable, given the unambiguous statement in line 304 that Ipomedon was her only child.

It is more than disconcerting, then, to learn during the queen's deathbed conversation with the hero some 1400 lines later that she has another son, who will be able to recognise his half-brother by means of a ring which she presents to the latter.<sup>11</sup> The extreme compression of this scene — the existence of the other son and the fact that no-one else knows about him are revealed in three lines — suggests something more than conventional romance mystification. The narrator seems to be testing to the limit the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief in order to be entertained. Who is this child's father? How can the queen have concealed his existence from Hermogenés and the rest of his court? Why should she have wanted to do so? How can she have lost touch with her son for so long? Why does she not tell Ipomedon his name? Why does he not ask? No answers to these questions are given or even suggested. The reader who agrees to go along with the text's extreme withholding of information does so on the implicit understanding that all will be revealed at a later stage in the narrative. Hue's narrator, however, fails to honour his side of the

contract. When Ipomedon is finally reunited with his half-brother, the audience learns nothing that they have not already been told or prompted to work out for themselves.<sup>12</sup> During the climactic exchange between the hero and Capaneus after the latter has recognised the ring on the hero's finger (ll. 10214-86), Ipomedon re-tells his life story, while Capaneus simply declares that they are brothers; the only other information he provides about his past is precisely the one thing we already know:

[...] nus eimes freres,  
 Mes nus eümes divers peres,  
 Mes nus une mere avïon. (10283-85)

Besides failing to answer the questions raised in the deathbed scene, this episode also raises another. Given that Ipomedon had agreed to his mother's request to wear the ring at all times, and given that he and Capaneus had become close companions during the time he spent at Meleager's court as the *dru la reine*, how was it that Capaneus had failed to notice the ring when they sat at table together and drank from the same cup (ll. 2937-52), but managed to recognise it in the heat of battle when he and his friend were engaged in mortal combat? The situation is so improbable that the only possible answer to the question is 'Because the poet says so'. If Capaneus, as a reader of annular signs, can be seen as a figure of the text's own readers, then the implication is that we, like him, are the narrator's puppets, whose responses he will manipulate as he sees fit, with as little regard for our autonomy as he has for *vraisemblance*.<sup>13</sup> This suggests a different perspective on the sense of complicity between author-narrator and audience which a number of critics have seen as a distinctive feature of the text.<sup>14</sup> The frequent narratorial interventions and topical asides appear to be inviting the audience to join in the game of laughing at the hapless victims of the hero's multiple disguises. The example of Capaneus and the ring indicates, however, that that sense of complicity may simply be the bait with which the text lures us into participating in a game which is being played at our own expense. The ultimate victims are the audience, who are here asked to suspend disbelief until such time as the narrator decides to let them glimpse a truth which has been staring them in the face all along.

The setting of false trails, littered with unanswered questions, is only one tactic within the overall strategy of blocking avenues of

interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Another is the use of contradictions. At its most obvious, this technique simply involves the juxtaposing of statements which appear to cancel each other out, as when the narrator comments in lines 534 to 536 that the young hero's courtly virtues were so great as to make it almost irrelevant whether he demonstrated *pruësce* or not, and then immediately condemns cowardice in the strongest possible terms (ll. 549-50).<sup>16</sup> On a slightly more sophisticated level, we find the attribution to the hero, in certain episodes, of actions and sentiments which are totally at odds with the way in which he is portrayed elsewhere. Thus at the conclusion of the war in France between the brothers Atreüs and Daire, Ipomedon welcomes the latter's offer of Saxony and his daughter's hand in marriage in return for brokering a peace treaty, 'Kar sa fille ai mut cuveitee' (l. 7561). How is the audience to reconcile this statement with the hero's previous demonstration of unshakeable loyalty to his beloved La Fiere?<sup>17</sup> Contradictory messages are also inscribed into some of the most basic elements of the narrative, such as the choice of names for the protagonists. The name of the hero is taken from the *Roman de Thèbes*, and at first sight appears simply to reinforce the link with the *romans d'antiquité* established in the prologue. However, the prologue is balanced by an ironic epilogue (ll. 10541-50) which reverses the intertextual link, claiming that the story of Thebes is simply a continuation of the 'estorie' which Hue has just translated. The choice of the name Ipomedon thus initially encourages the reader to invest the text with the borrowed authority of Statius and one of the earliest vernacular romances. The epilogue later prompts us retrospectively to question that authority, and even to substitute the poem's own authority for that of Latin epic and French romance alike. At the same time, the blatantly irreverent untruth of Hue's claim to anteriority invites us to restore the prestige of the *Roman de Thèbes*. However, this process of recuperation is itself made impossible by the proliferation of other names taken from the *Thèbes*, which further undercuts the concept of textual authority: borrowing one or two proper names from an earlier text may be a mark of respect, but naming fourteen protagonists after their Theban counterparts smacks of parody.<sup>18</sup>

The mental gymnastics required of the reader in trying to make sense of the use of classical names in *Ipomedon* is also called for in what has usually been regarded as a fairly straightforward aspect of the text: Hue's antifeminism. Here again we are presented with a thesis

and an implicit antithesis, accompanied by subversion of both, a strategy which leads to interpretative gridlock. Antifeminism manifests itself in a series of narratorial interventions on the failings of women, some of which are also repeated in speeches attributed to characters, as well as in the structuring of the story, which, as Krueger has shown, progressively undermines the power of the heroine La Fiere and reduces her to the status of plaything of the manipulative hero.<sup>19</sup> Much of the criticism of women centres around their fickleness, and is focused on the characters of Meleager's queen and La Fiere. The queen has fallen for her mysterious *dru*, who takes no part in the three-day tournament held to find a husband for La Fiere, but cannot help being attracted by reports of the prowess of the white and red knights who distinguish themselves on the first and second days of the tournament respectively. On the second occasion, the narrator comments unambiguously:

Ja ne verrez femme si sage  
 Ke akune feix ne chant curage;  
 Heer desira veer celui,  
 Hui recuveite el plus cestui. (5447-50)

The same point is made, though without the overt criticism of women, about the heroine, who is extremely tempted to put aside her feelings for her nameless *vadlet* in favour of the same white knight, and then to transfer her affections from him to the red knight when the latter outperforms everyone on day two. On both occasions the narrator comments that only her 'fine leauté' stops her from falling head-over-heels in love with the knights in question (ll. 3865-74 and 4793-800). The message seems to be that woman's fidelity is a very fragile thing, and liable to be sorely tested from one day to the next. And yet, when we pause to think about the situation, the message is not quite as obvious as it seems. Both women are, in fact, being attracted to the same man each time (the *dru*, the *vadlet* and the white and red knights are all Ipomedon in various disguises), so their apparent fickleness is actually proof of consistency: they always fall for the hero, no matter what disguise he may adopt. The dilemma in which La Fiere finds herself is simply a demonstration of her 'fine leauté', since she is wavering between love for the hero and love for the hero. And yet, of course, both women believe that they are being attracted to a succession of strangers. So is the reader to conclude that

women are fickle and potentially promiscuous, or that they are instinctively drawn to men of worth and remain true to them despite appearances? The text simultaneously supports and negates both interpretations.<sup>20</sup>

A similar strategy informs the presentation of the relationship between love and chivalry. The text signals its preoccupation with the chivalry topos at a very early stage. The prologue (ll. 1-48) leads in to an exordium (ll. 49-168) which introduces king Meleager of Sicily, his nephew Capaneus, his sister (unnamed) and her daughter, who has vowed only to love the most valiant knight in the world, and has so earned herself the nickname *La Fiere*. The narrative proper begins with the introduction of the hero, whose decision to go to *La Fiere's* court not to become a knight, or to win renown, but to learn *affaitement* immediately suggests an engagement with the chivalry topos, a suspicion which is then confirmed by his feigned lack of interest in jousting, swordplay and other manly activities (ll. 519-28). The dialectically-inclined reader assumes at this point that the story is either going to negate the chivalry topos by showing that it is possible for *La Fiere* to love a man who denies his potential for prowess, or to validate it by having *Ipomedon* reveal his true nature and win her by his chivalric skill. In the event, both and neither turn out to be true.

The heroine falls in love with the *vadlet* without him accomplishing a single chivalric deed (negation of the chivalry topos), but he is only pretending to be a coward, and later gives supreme proof of his prowess, thus inspiring even greater love in her (negation of the negation). But since the audience knows from the outset that the hero's cowardice is feigned, the heroine's initial attraction to him can be read as showing that even latent prowess can inspire love (extreme validation of the chivalry topos). Later on, though, the hero is inspired to impersonate his own rival and threaten to force *La Fiere* to give herself to someone who has proved to be the finest knight, but whom she cannot love (negation of the validation). Yet because the man who is now entitled to claim her hand is in fact the man she loves, in disguise, the chivalry topos finally appears to work. Or does it? The end result of *La Fiere's* love and *Ipomedon's* prowess is stalemate: his impersonation of *Leonin* forces her to renege on her vow and attempt to leave the country to escape him, while he refuses yet again to claim his prize and heads off into the wide blue yonder. The situation is resolved only through the intervention of *Capaneus*, who just happens



to be La Fiere's cousin and Ipomedon's long-lost half brother, and just happens to ride up as La Fiere is sailing away, and then, having engaged Ipomedon in combat, just happens to dislodge his mail gauntlet, thus revealing the ring which the latter's mother had given him and which only his half-brother would be able to recognise. The dénouement cheerfully parades its own contrivance, inviting the conclusion that no resolution is in fact logically possible: the chivalry topos is revealed to be a vicious spiral which endlessly alienates the knight and his lady from one another until the poet-narrator imposes an entirely arbitrary form of closure.

If, as we suggested earlier, Capaneus can be seen in this final sequence as a reader at the mercy of a manipulative writer, Ipomedon himself appears throughout the text as a figure of the author. Calin notes how the manipulative hero functions as a surrogate for the poet, his self-sufficiency and the opacity of his motivation figuring the non-accountable autonomy of the writer of fictional narratives.<sup>21</sup> He does not comment, however, on one episode which to my mind encapsulates this more fully than any other, and which lends support to the hypothesis that *Ipomedon* is an exercise in taking apart the notion of romance as something capable of bearing meaning. On each morning of the three-day tournament, Ipomedon absents himself from the court of king Meleager, ostensibly to go hunting, but actually to join in the fighting in disguise. On the second day, he sets out very early indeed, before daybreak (l. 4488), and, as on Day 1, encourages his huntsmen and hounds to make as much noise as possible, so that everyone in the town and the castle is woken up (ll. 4493-500). The ladies of the court complain vociferously to the queen about her *dru* disturbing their beauty sleep for no good reason:

E dient: 'Mal seit il venu,  
 Kar si ne deit pas chevaler  
 Es chambres dames esveiller;  
 Aukes ad plus suëf dedut  
 Les deit l'um esveiller la nuit.' (4506-10)

As the inscribed audience of Ipomedon's cacophonous pantomime, the ladies are another textual equivalent of the external reader. They are woken up by a racket which serves no purpose other than to prove that Ipomedon can disturb them when he feels like it (since the court already knows that the queen's *dru* hunts on a daily basis, the

informational content of the hullabaloo is nil). In the same way, the reader's understanding of romance is undermined by a text which offers nothing in its place, and flaunts its disruption of conventions simply to draw attention to its own cleverness. The hunt which follows can also be read as a metaphorical enactment of the relationship between author and audience. Members of the court feast on game which they believe comes from the queen's *dru*; he in fact catches nothing, because he is off attending the tournament, but cheerfully encourages the belief that he was responsible for providing them with *veneison*. Likewise, members of the audience may assume that the text offers a *sens* sanctioned by the author, while he absents himself from the forest of potential meanings, and rejoices in their willing acceptance of a delusory prey.

The introduction of sex into the picture in the final couplet of the ladies' complaint prepares the way for the poem's notorious epilogue, which makes use of intertextual commentary to establish subversive correspondences between intercourse and writing. As Holden has noted, the first part of Hue's epilogue is a reworking of the closing lines of Thomas's *Tristan* (pp. 51 and 56).<sup>22</sup> Before looking at this in more detail, it is worth noting that the final lines of the romance proper may also contain a parodic reference to another version of the Tristan story. Béroul's description of the lovers' life in the forest of Morrois expresses the idea of love transcending suffering in a perfectly-balanced couplet which one is tempted to think the medieval audience must have quoted as often as undergraduate essay-writers:

Tant s'entraiment de bone amor  
L'un por l'autre ne sent dolor.<sup>23</sup>

Hue appears to rewrite these lines so as to strip away any notion of transcendence, presenting the reality of true love as he sees it:

Chescun de cez ad ben gardé  
A autre sa virginité,  
Or se entreatment tant par amur  
Ke il se entrefoutent tute jur. (10513-16)

The first couplet, with its emphasis on virginity, appears to reject the flawed passion of Tristan and Iseut, but the second also subverts the ideal of conjugal love which other *romanciers* such as Gautier d'Arras

had substituted for it. The marriage of chaste lovers which forms the finale to this work turns out to be simply an opportunity for non-stop copulation.

The reduction of the whole romance enterprise to the pursuit of good sex is signalled even more clearly in the epilogue. There is more to this passage, however, than gratuitous scurrility.<sup>24</sup> There is also a deliberate linking of sexual with writerly activity which implies that the act of writing is itself an evasion, which inevitably denatures desire. Thomas's *Tristan* concludes not only with a dedication to lovers, but also with some reflections on his own achievement as a writer:

Tumas fine ci sun escrit:  
 A tuz amanz saluz i dit,  
 As pensis e as amerus,  
 As emvius, as desirus,  
 As enveisiez e as purvers,  
 A tuz cels ki orunt ces vers.  
 Si dit n'ai a tuz lor voleir,  
 Le milz ai dit a mon poeir,  
 E dit ai tute la verur,  
 Si cum jo pramis al primur.<sup>25</sup>

This epilogue also gives meaning to the poem, as Thomas goes on to explain that he wrote it in the hope that other lovers might recognise themselves in parts of the tale and draw consolation from it when faced with the trials and tribulations of love. Hue de Rotelande's epilogue is likewise addressed to all lovers, and also purports to help them to understand what love is all about:

Ipomedon a tuz amanz  
 Mande saluz en cest romanz  
 Par cest Hue de Rotelande;  
 De part le deu d'amur cumande  
 Des or mes lealment amer,  
 Sens tricherie e senz fauser;  
 E se nuls de amer se retrait  
 Devant ço ke il ait sun bon fait,  
 Enfin cil ert escumengé,  
 E puis si ait plener cungé

De enveisir la u il purra,  
Asouz ert cil ki plus avra. (10559-70)

However, the message the audience is invited to take away from the story of *Ipomedon* — a message endorsed by three authority figures: the God of Love, the hero himself and Hue the narrator — is that true love simply means sex and lots of it. Thomas's authorly concern with the quality of his literary production and its reception by a courtly audience is replaced by a preoccupation with the quality of sexual performance and the finding of receptive females. By evoking the conclusion to Thomas's *Tristan* and substituting sex for writing, the epilogue to *Ipomedon* draws attention to the fact that Thomas and others like him are actually engaged in doing the reverse. It neatly suggests that writing fiction, or romance, is simply a displacement activity, a substitute for intercourse. The nature of the relationship between sex and writing is explored further in the second half of the epilogue, in which Hue invites any noblewoman who may be sceptical about his claim to possess the god of love's charter of absolution for amatory sinners to come to his house in Credenhill to see it:

Ainz ke d'iloc s'en seit turné  
La chartre li ert enbreuvé,  
E ço n'ert pas trop grant damages  
Se li seaus li pent as nages. (10577-80)<sup>26</sup>

The use of the written text as a euphemism for the male member rather obviously enacts the process of sublimation inherent in romance, and which Hue appears to have set himself the task of exposing. The textual authority represented by the seal is, he implies, merely a poor metaphorical substitute for the authentic experience afforded by its anatomical equivalents. Susan Crane concludes that the message of the epilogue is that 'romance's versions of achievement disguise or evade the true character of desire', and that it argues for the incorporation of 'purely autonomous gratification' of sexual desire as an essential element in the construction of selfhood typically associated with the romance hero (pp. 170-73).

The problem with this interpretation, as Hue himself well knew, is that you cannot simultaneously gratify desire and defer its gratification as required by the pursuit of other aspects of the process of self-

actualisation. Re-reading the text in the light of the epilogue, we are forced to recall incidents which run counter to the latter's apparent logic, and which destabilise even this last-ditch attempt to make sense of *Ipomedon*. One such incident occurs in the final section of the text, when the hero responds to the heroine's desperate call for a champion to defend her against the hideous Leonin. Ipomedon, disguised this time as a madman, travels with La Fiere's attendant Ismeine from the court of King Meleager to rescue her mistress. Ismeine is attracted to the hero in spite of his disguise, and would certainly not be averse to a little entertainment en route: when the pair take lodgings for the night, Ipomedon reclines on a rich carpet, Ismeine looks long and hard at him, and the narrator comments:

Debez ait il, s'e l ne la fut!  
 Nu l'ait, a Deu fei! Ke il né volt  
 Pur la Fiere, dunt se dolt. (8648-50)

The hero's subsequent defence of his chastity even extends to biting Ismeine and threatening to cut her hand off with his sword when she approaches him in the middle of the night. The narrator explicitly criticises the hero for his deferral of gratification in line 8648, but then negates that criticism and postpones Ipomedon's first sexual experience until after he has completed yet more acts of chivalry. Moreover, as we have seen, the concluding lines of the poem contain implicit praise of the hero's chastity, coupled with the suggestion that gratification, when finally achieved, is all the more satisfying for having been deferred. So the text appears simultaneously to condemn playing the romance game of deferral; to play it by spinning out the action towards its implausible conclusion; to suggest that it is worth playing by rewarding the protagonists with non-stop sexual satisfaction at the end; and to imply that it is meaningless by drawing attention in the epilogue to its status as a displacement activity.<sup>27</sup>

A 'ualist' reading of *Ipomedon*, such as that proposed by Crane or Calin, recognises the existence of such contradictory elements in the text, but attempts to negotiate contradiction within the conceptual framework set out in the prologue — i.e. this is a romance, romance offers its readers a *sens*, and therefore *Ipomedon* has a *sens* — by allowing two opposing meanings to co-exist within the same textual space. It could be argued, however, that the prologue is simply the first, and possibly the most audacious, of the many false trails laid by

the text. It encourages the reader to look for meaning in a poem which is actually designed to subvert interpretative strategies. The main body of the text sets out, with malice aforethought, to prove that the syllogism proposed by the prologue is a false one: this poem, which bears all the outward signs of being a romance, does not have a *sens*. In its deliberate and systematic thwarting of the audience's desire to make sense of the action which unfolds before them, *Ipomedon* runs counter to the fundamental tendency of twelfth-century courtly narrative to invite and support the construction of meaning from fictional scenarios. Hue's poem is more than just a parodic or burlesque narrative: it is a sophisticated (and often irritating) hermeneutic game that implies a rather disturbing model of the relationship between author and audience of vernacular romance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hue de Rotelande, *Ipomedon*, ed. A. J. Holden, Paris, Klincksieck, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> See *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Leopold Constans, 6 vols, Paris, 1904-12, II. 1-32, particularly II. 23-24; Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. Karl Warnke and trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner, Paris, Livre de Poche Lettres Gothiques, 1990, Prologue II. 1-22; *Partonopeus de Blois*, ed. Joseph Gildea, 2 vols, Villanova University Press, 1967-70, II. 129-34.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald M. Spensley, 'The Structure of Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*', *Romania* 95 (1974): 341-51.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Hanning, 'Engin in Twelfth-Century Romance: an Examination of the *Roman d'Eneas* and of Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*', *Yale French Studies* 51 (1974): 92-101.

<sup>5</sup> The burlesque nature of the text had already been noted by Dominica Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and its Background*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1963, who described it as 'almost a parody of the courtly romance' (p. 90; see also her introductory remarks on p. 85).

<sup>6</sup> 'Le secret de l'étrange chevalier: notes sur la motivation contradictoire dans le roman médiéval', in *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society (Toronto 1983)*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1985, pp. 340-45.

<sup>7</sup> *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, 158-74 (the quotation comes from p. 170). Philippe Ménard comes to much the same conclusion: 'Même les écrivains qui font une très large

place au comique et à l'humour, comme Huon de Rotelande dans son *Ipomedon* ou l'auteur d'*Aucassin et Nicolette*, donnent l'impression de prendre au sérieux l'histoire qu'ils racontent.' (*Le Rire et le sourire dans les romans courtois en France au Moyen Age (1150-1250)*, Geneva, Droz, 1969, p. 749). Drawing on Crane, Rosalind Field also notes that 'the disruptive effects of Hue's humour' are combined with 'the serious feudal interests [...] which *Ipomedon* shares with other Anglo-Norman insular romances': see '*Ipomedon to Ipomadon A: Two Views of Courtliness*', in *The Medieval Translator: Papers from the Gregynog Conference 1987*, ed. Roger Ellis, Cambridge, Brewer, 1989, pp. 135-41 (p. 139).

<sup>8</sup> 'The Exaltation and Undermining of Romance: *Ipomedon*', in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 2, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly and Keith Busby, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1988, 111-24.

<sup>9</sup> 'Misogyny, Manipulation, and the Female Reader in Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*', in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context, Selected Papers from the 5th Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Dalfsen, 1986*, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1990, pp. 395-409. The quotations are taken from pp. 397 and 405 respectively. There is a brief discussion of Hue's anti-feminism and its (unfavourable) implications for *fin'amor* on pp. 63-66 of William Calin's 'Contre la *fin'amor*? Contre la femme? Une relecture de textes du Moyen Age' in the same volume (pp. 61-82).

<sup>10</sup> This is rather different from the process of problematising questions such as male-female power relations identified by Krueger. Problematisation opens up a space for debate and allows for the possibility of an eventual resolution; Hue's deconstruction of textual meaning generates laughter but ultimately leads nowhere.

<sup>11</sup> This son is presumably the child of her unnamed first husband, referred to in l. 182.

<sup>12</sup> The way in which Capaneus is introduced in the poem's prelude provides a rather obvious clue that he will turn out to be the hero's brother, a conclusion which is amply confirmed by the narrator's comment about Capaneus's growing affection for Ipomedon at Meleager's court 'Jo quit asez plus l'amereit/ S'il en soüst ke jo en sai' (ll. 3184-85). The 'revelation' of his true identity in the dénouement simply confirms what the audience was invited to deduce several thousand lines earlier.

<sup>13</sup> Holden, pp. 54-55. Holden is wrong, however, to include the 'resurrection' of Daire in his list of deliberate *invraisemblances* and to compare it in the note to l. 7270 (p. 556) with the bringing back to life of the murdered baron in Béroul's *Tristan*. The Daire who is killed by

*Ipomedon* on the first day of the tournament is clearly introduced as 'uns bons quens d'Alemaigne' (l. 4021), and as such cannot be identified with Daire king of Lorraine who features in the initial list of participants (ll. 3423-24) and in the French episode later in the poem (ll. 7267ff.). The poet's decision to include two Daires is almost certainly another humorous nod in the direction of the *Roman de Thèbes*, which features two distinct characters called Daire, one (Daire le Roux) a Theban baron, and the other a king. If Hue's audience was as confused as the poem's editor by the appearance of two figures with the same name in the same tournament, this is probably no more than was intended, given the text's overall strategy of disrupting normal modes of listening and reading.

<sup>14</sup> Krueger, 'Misogyny and Manipulation', p. 401, and 'The Author's Voice: Narrators, Audiences and the Problem of Interpretation', in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, Volume I, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly and Keith Busby, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1987, pp. 115-140 (pp. 122-25); Brenda Hosington, 'The Englishing of the Comic Technique in Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*', in *Medieval Translators and their Craft*, ed. Jeanette Beer, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 1989, pp. 247-63 (pp. 248-49).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Hanning devotes two wonderfully lucid pages to the problems of interpretation in *Ipomedon* in his paper "'I Shal Finde It in a Maner Glose": Versions of Textual Harassment in Medieval Literature', in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1987, pp. 27-50 (pp. 36-37), but does not explore the wider implications of his conclusion that 'the alternatives open to the would-be glossator confronted by obscure texts, and their equivalent in the realm of experience, seem to be the discovery of unpleasant, unsettling truths and the inability to discover truth at all' (p. 37).

<sup>16</sup> The contradiction inherent in the hero's persona of the Beau Couard is discussed by Ménard, p. 388.

<sup>17</sup> Bernhard Diensberg notes how the English adaptor of *Ipomadon A* 'more consciously explains and justifies the hero's unexpected decisions' which remain unexplained and unmotivated in the original: see 'The Middle English Romance *Ipomadon* and its Anglo-Norman Source', *Proceedings of the Anglistentag 1989 Würzburg (1990)*, 289-97 (p. 293). This suggests that the poet was aware both that his audience expected romance to make sense, and that Hue's poem ran counter to that expectation.

<sup>18</sup> As well as the hero, Hue's text features Amfion (Amphion in the *Thèbes*), Amfiorax (Amphiaras), Antenor (Anthenor), Capaneus, Creon,



two Daires, Dirceus, Drias, Meleager (Meleagés), Monesteus (Menesteus), Nestor and Ismeine. It is also possible that Ipomedon's messenger Egeon is a variant of the Theban Hegés.

<sup>19</sup> 'Misogyny and Manipulation', especially pp. 397-404.

<sup>20</sup> Brenda Thawn has noted the way in which all three Middle English versions of *Ipomedon* play down the apparent fickleness of the heroine: see 'La Fiere: the Career of Hue de Rotelande's Heroine in England', *Reading Medieval Studies* 9 (1983): 56-69 (pp. 63-64). This may suggest that the English poets were aware of the interpretative difficulty associated with her conduct in Hue's poem, and attempted to resolve it by writing out the most problematic element. For further examples of the toning-down of humour at the expense of women in *Ipomedon A*, see Hosington, 'The Englishing of the Comic Technique', *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Calin, 'The Exaltation and Undermining of Romance', 121-23; 'Contre la fin' amor?', pp. 65-66. Krueger, 'Misogyny and Manipulation', also notes how 'the narrator allies himself with his ingenious hero' (p. 400).

<sup>22</sup> The argument is taken further by Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 171-73.

<sup>23</sup> Bérout, *Tristan*, ll. 1365-66, in *Tristan et Iseut: Les poèmes français, la saga norroise*, ed. and trans. Daniel Lacroix et Philippe Walter, Paris, Livre de Poche Lettres Gothiques, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> On obscenity as a form of closure and comic resolution, see Leslie Dunton-Downer, 'Poetic Language and the Obscene', in *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. 19-37 (p. 33).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, *Tristan*, Sneyd fragment ll. 38-47, in Lacroix and Walter (see above).

<sup>26</sup> For more detailed discussion of l. 10580, see Nicolas Jacobs, 'Une allusion impudique chez Hue de Rotelande: *se li seaus li pent as nages*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 96 (1995): 223-24. Rosalind Field rightly sees these lines as subversive, in that 'the revelation of the narrator as lecherous cleric throws into confusion the values of his entire narration' (p. 138), but for her such subversion forms part of a playful contract between Hue and his 'sophisticated and modern' audience to pass ironic, urbane comment on courtly romance. My analysis suggests that the epilogue is central to a strategy of deception which distances the author from his audience rather than uniting them in 'an identity of response and shared humour' (p.137).

<sup>27</sup> It is useful to compare *Ipomedon* with the *Lai du Lecheor*, which is similarly critical of the coyness of courtly literature, but articulates its criticism without invalidating the enterprise of which it is a part. See *Three Old French Narrative Lays: Trot, Lecheor, Nabaret*, ed. and trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, Liverpool Online Series Critical Editions of French Texts (<http://www.liv.ac.uk/www/French/LOS/>), 1999, pp. 60-61.