Pleasure in Knighthood: The Private Construction of a Social Identity in *Partonopeu de Blois* and its Middle English Adaptation

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The construction of chivalric identity in medieval romance often exposes a conflict between private and public realization, or, in other words, pleasure and duty.[1] The hero must find fulfilment in the private sphere of love as well as assume his social and militant role. The chivalric hero thus becomes 'a divided self', as Simon Gaunt puts it, 'split between an impulse towards social integration and a counter-impulse towards socially alienating, but privately fulfilling desires.'[2] While this tension is certainly at play in the popular twelfth-century Old French romance *Partonopeu de Blois*, this coming-of-age story suggests that the experience of private pleasure enables the public performance of knighthood.[3] Before becoming a high-performing knight of the French army, the young Partonopeu is brought to a beautiful and exotic town where he discovers love and wallows for a year in the pleasures of sex, hunting and eating. His chivalric education thus appears to coincide with his sexual education, which is more broadly an education in pleasure. The present article argues that this romance places a particular emphasis on the private, the feminine and the emotional in the hero's construction of his knightly identity, suggesting a potential continuity between individual pleasure and the social performance of chivalric identity. A comparison with its fifteenth-century Middle English adaptation, which displays some unease with these elements, showcases the significance – and particularity – of the role of pleasure and the private sphere in the romance's depiction of masculine identity.[4] Having been written more than two centuries later, the Middle English

version can be seen to follow some of the recognised trends of romance adaptation. Helen Cooper has thus shown that Middle English romances tend to be more pious than their continental sources, to display greater plausibility and to emphasise action.[5] The Middle English *Partonope of Blois* indeed follows some of these tendencies, while remaining mostly faithful to its source's plot and characterisation. By focusing on the private and emotional sphere, the present comparative study suggests that the romance, in both of its versions, offers an original model for the construction of chivalric identity, based on pleasure.

My analysis focuses on two sections of the plot that are crucial to developing Partonopeu's knightly identity in the Old French and Middle English versions of the romance, both of which happen outside the public realm of masculine knighthood. The first one is found at the start of the story and encompasses the introduction of the hero and his getting lost in a forest while hunting, up to his miraculous arrival in Chef d'Oire, where he meets the invisible Melior and remains for a year. This part of the tale constitutes the preparatory phase of Partonopeu's career as a knight. The second section of the tale that I will consider has many parallels with the first one. It starts after he has broken his promise to Melior to never try to see her and, having been rejected by her, flees alone into the forest to let himself die in despair. At this point, our hero is back in the forest where his knightly quest started and is once again rescued, put in a boat, and brought to a haven of safety and comfort by a lady – this time Melior's sister Urraque. This rescue is followed by the knighting ceremony, which makes official Partonopeu's identity as a knight. Both moments are thus crucial to the construction of his social identity as a man and a knight and yet they both happen in complete isolation from what Simon Gaunt calls 'the masculine social', in the feminine sphere of 'the supernatural and private'.[6]

Gaunt has famously argued that, while identity construction is monologic in the *chansons de geste*, male characters defining themselves 'in relation to other men', it is dialogic in the romances: 'a relationship with a woman thereby becomes a prerequisite of masculine [identity]'.[7] Love and the feminine bring the hero on a path of self-discovery that is private rather than group-motivated.[8] Yet that individuation can potentially alienate him: medieval romance often rests

on a conflict between a process of individuation, actualized in a relationship with a woman, and one of integration in masculine society.[9] This contrast is exacerbated in the Partonopeu romance which famously blends features taken from the *chanson de geste* genre with courtly romance and the fairy lover motif.[10] It thus features long passages where the protagonist evolves in the masculine society of the battlefield and establishes homosocial bonds, alongside passages where he is completely removed from such society, in the sole company of women. These spaces appear incompatible throughout the romance until the final tournament that sees knights competing for Melior's hand in marriage. Interestingly, however, the identity of the male hero is mostly shaped within those feminine spaces. As has often been noted, Partonopeu is highly dependent on women in his self-actualization. Hosington thus argues that in both the Old French and the Middle English versions, 'the three main female characters – Melior, Uraque, Partonopeu's mother – influence him by each providing him with an identity': Melior that of secret lover, his mother the social identity of son, nephew of the King of France and 'defender of home and country', while Uraque helps him to find his own identity between 'love and social duty'.[11] I argue that, rather than each forcing a specific identity on him, Melior and Urraque provide the hero with spaces outside of masculine, chivalric society where his individual pleasure comes first. It is within these spaces that he can individually and emotionally adopt the social identity of knighthood. The fulfilment of his personal desires through material, sensual and emotional pleasure indeed play an unusually big role in this romance and seem to foster rather than hinder the formation of his social identity as a knight, a nobleman and ultimately a husband and emperor.

To become a knight, Partonopeu must first become a man: the story starts when Partonopeu is very young – only thirteen years old in the original French version. As Penny Eley notes, most of the translations make him less precocious, which suggests that Partonopeu's young age is 'a departure from [...] an accepted literary paradigm'.[12] Despite his young age, Partonopeu exhibits an impressive array of qualities: he is brave and valiant, humble and sweet (A 545-7), but above all he is extremely handsome.[13] Having spent three lines describing his moral qualities, the narrator quickly moves on to a long and detailed

physical description. Here we find a second surprising element: Partonopeu is portrayed in a sexualized and feminized way, including sensual features, such as a kissable mouth. Eley and Simons have shown how this passage displays elements typical of portraits of women and argue that it contributes to turning Partonopeu into a sex object.[14] Throughout the first part of the French romance, Partonopeu thus possesses a dual status as a young boy (*damoisel* A 564, *enfant* A 629), and an object of sexual desire. Knighthood, and manhood, are not yet part of his identity.

The English adaptor, by contrast, substantially revises this first introduction. Significantly, he raises the age of the hero from thirteen to eighteen. Gretchen Mieszkowski proposes that this radical change might in fact be a scribal error.[15] The translator, she argues, does still refer to the protagonist as a child, and retains the plot elements that require Partonope to be very young: namely, that he has not yet been knighted and must thus wait several years before he is fit to marry Melior and become emperor. Yet, Mieszkowski does not entirely rule out the possibility of a deliberate change of age, noting that, as we shall see, the translator does seem 'uneasy about the initial bedroom scene', a discomfort that might justify the change.[16] For my part, I would argue that it emerges more clearly that the change is deliberate if we look to its direct context, as well as the other changes the translator makes. Most significantly, he first introduces Partonope as a man rather than a child ('thys manne' 506 and 522), although his youth is nonetheless acknowledged: he is a 'yonge man' (508) and 'off hys age he had no pere' (519).[17] Secondly, the translator entirely omits the long physical description present in the French version. This striking omission may indicate a reluctance to overtly sexualize the young protagonist: by making him an eighteen-year-old man and concentrating on his moral qualities, the translator resolves any uneasiness that may arise with regards to the sexualization of a child. Partonope, unlike his French counterpart, is, at the start, a manly hero: he is not a child and in no way feminized or sexualized.[18]

Masculinity in fact appears as a more important concept in the Middle English translation: the terms *manhode* and *manly* are firmly embedded in the construction of knighthood, while they lack any equivalent in the French original.[19] The word *manhode* appears twenty-

one times in *Partonope*, rhyming six times with *knyghthode* and appearing a couple of times in close proximity to the term *chivalry*. All in all, the English adaptation makes much more explicit the question of gender identity and its significance in the construction of knightly identity. The term *manhode*, in Middle English, encompasses the implicit qualities and behaviour displayed by an exemplary man, defined by the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) as 'manliness' as well as 'chivalric nature', 'courageous behaviour' or 'courteous behaviour'. Manhood and knighthood thus appear as interconnected forms of identity, which entail a form of social behaviour. This change in the conceptual terminology of chivalric identity makes the category of manhood much more explicit within the chivalric ethos and therefore impacts the representation of Partonope's coming-of-age and the formation of his adult, masculine identity.

The English version emphasizes the transition of the young protagonist from child to man in the first part of the romance, revealing a hesitation between wanting to depict a manly hero and following the original coming-of-age plot. After the introduction, the narrative begins with Partonope and his uncle Clovis, King of France, going boar hunting in the Ardennes, during which Partonope gets lost and ends up spending the whole night alone in the forest. Here, Partonope is referred to as a child for the first time: 'Thys was welle don, as of a chylde,/[...] He ys ryghte lyke to ben a man' (556-9). As he performs the 'manly' act of killing a boar, the hero is revealed to not actually be a man, but rather a 'chylde', which can refer to a 'young child' or a 'young man, youth' according to the *MED*, who is almost *like* a man. The following lines depict the hero's lonely, terrifying night in the forest and his discovery of a magical ship, which brings him to the marvellous, but entirely empty, city of Chef d'Oire. Here, Partonope is no longer described as a man but as a lost *chylde*. This episode is central to the presentation of Partonope's inner, emotional identity as that of a boy who is becoming a man, since he is absolutely alone, and does nothing more than react emotionally to what is happening to him. Neal describes the English Partonope's 'acquiescence to his journey' as 'a giving over of the self to something that is inevitable, unknown, but possibly pleasurable.'[20] I argue, however, that the English adaptor reduces his complete passivity as well as the emphasis on pleasure.

The English translation first follows the French text relatively closely, as both versions offer a poignant and realistic picture of a lost, scared child. The Middle English version, however, demonstrates a preference for speech and action over description, a tendency that is typical of such romance adaptation.[21] But while Helen Cooper has argued that English romances tend 'to indicate emotion more by action and statement than by soliloquy', this English adaptor introduces numerous first-person prayers and emotional soliloquies in lieu of the French version's visual descriptions of the crying Partonopeu. The English Partonope is thus able to voice some resistance to what happens to him, by expressing his fears and praying to God for help. Rather than complete passivity, he displays a form of reflexive coping mechanism as well as decision-making. While the French Partonopeu 'Pleure des iols, ne set que faire,/Car n'ert apris de nul mal traire.' (A 659-60 *He cries his eyes out, now knowing what to do, because he is not used to suffering*), the English one expresses his dismay: 'what may I do? [...] Helpe me lorde Gode' (658-661) and then takes a decision: 'the yonge man wyste not what to do,/But at the laste he drew hym to/An olde tre, an holowe thynge,/Ther-in to have his loggyng.' (664-67). Interestingly, the added direct speech also allows the translator to make explicit the emotional transition from youth to man that occurs in the first part of the romance. Once in the empty palace, upon entering the chamber, Partonope exclaims: 'I wolle as ny as euer I can/Take herte to me, and be a man' (1120-21). Yet even as he professes to be a man, he is referred to as 'the chylde' by the narrator only eight lines later and is, in fact, almost exclusively referred to as such throughout this passage. The identity categories of man and child, or at least youth, are thus explicitly emphasized and problematized in the English version of the romance, which highlights the unusual presence of such a young and passive hero in the romance genre. Partonope may be presented as an eighteen-year-old man at the start of the story, fit to be its manly hero, but he must still undergo a coming-of-age, which is a key element of the French version's plot. The English Partonope, at the start of the story, is alternately a *man* and a *chylde*, oscillating between youth and manhood, as he learns to overcome his fear.

While fear is an important part of the young man's self-discovery during his first adventure in the forest and his arrival in Chef d'Oire, it

is soon replaced, or at least accompanied by pleasure.[22] In the French version, fear is consistently mixed with awe and pleasure. As he discovers the city, his *dolor* and *peor* are mixed with his great *joie* at the place's beauty and wonder (A 874-77). The city, whose splendour is described at length, forms part of the sensual seduction of Partonopeu, substituting itself to Melior's physical beauty which remains invisible.[23] As he goes to sleep in the magnificent bed – also described at length – he is afraid of devils (A 1050), but also experiences intense pleasure (*loisir* A 1056). Partonopeu's transition from child to man involves overcoming his fear, but also the discovery of luxury and its pleasures. The Middle English version does not mention any joy, only the measured comment that Partonope's 'herte sum-what be-gan to lyghte' (941) at the beautiful view of the town. The translator refuses to dwell on the visual description of the chamber and the bed (1153-55), only mentioning the richness of the clothes laid out for him. Significantly, there is no mention of pleasure or leisure at this point, but only of fear ('mykell drede' 1157) and decision-making in the form of rhetorical questions ('what may I do' 1158). Fear, for the French Partonopeu, is directly mixed with pleasure in his aesthetic experience of Chef d'Oire, while for the English Partonope fear must first be overcome on its own before he can gain access to (sexual) pleasure.

The sexual encounter between Partonopeu and Melior is quite extraordinary in its graphic detail and violence. In both versions, the act is presented as a rape: Partonopeu overcomes his fear as he is driven by desire and forces himself on the mystery lady who has climbed into the bed. In the French romance, this is the first scene where Partonopeu speaks – finally becoming an actor after having been a silent spectator for so long. Though the scene clearly is a rape, Partonopeu learns afterward that Melior was, in fact, the instigator of his coming to Chef d'Oire, with the plan of marrying him. By contrast, while the English adaptor conveys the violence of the French version, he also reveals Melior's thoughts beforehand and posits her more strongly as a desiring subject.[24] This important passage thus problematizes the notions of female desire and male passivity: the woman performs passivity while she actually is the desiring agent, so that the young man can perform masculine agency. While she does desire him, the decision of whether or not she will have sex with him that night, well before they can get

married, is not hers. She can only worry and lament about the loss of honour that it would entail for her.[25] The young man, on the other hand, needs only worry about his pleasure.

Vines has analysed this scene as it appears in the Middle English text, arguing that it needs to look and feel like a rape to the young man, because 'male sexual aggression' is a 'fundamental aspect of establishing chivalric identity.'[26] While I agree that sexual desire brings the hero to action and thus helps him establish his manhood, I believe that the most important element of the sex scene, with regards to the hero's identity, is not the violence but the novel experiences of desire and pleasure – described as 'deduit' (A 1302) in the French text, and as 'game' (1573) in the English one. The sex scene marks the starting point to the year he will spend in the empty city of Chef d'Oire, a year during which he adopts the social identity of chivalry by being trained in pleasure rather than aggression. This is done in complete social isolation: because he is still too young to be an acceptable husband for Melior, their relationship must remain secret. His only social contact is Melior, who he can hear and touch, but not see. Chef d'Oire here corresponds to a representation of the Orient as an idyllic space dedicated to love and eroticism, as Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas argues: the Orient in *Partonopeu* is a place where the hero withdraws into himself, rather than opens up to others.[27] Until it becomes the 'real' place of which Partonopeu becomes emperor, the Orient is a fairy kingdom of beauty, sensuality and femininity. His becoming an adult and a nobleman, and his preparation towards knighthood, happen within this sensual sphere of pleasure, in isolation from the social world, and through the fulfilment of his personal desires.

After the sex scene, Melior explains to her young lover how she planned all of this and how she wants him to become, in two years and a half, her husband and the Emperor of Byzance. She reveals her plan to him so that he will become a 'cevaliers eslis' (A 1495 *elite knight*), 'a knyghte/A more a-beller' (1838-9). Interestingly, in practice, the programme consists almost exclusively of leisure. The first day, Partonopeu puts on the magnificent clothing laid out for him (FR A 1587-1594; ME 1953-1968) and is served a magnificent meal (the English translator has his Partonope exclaim: 'Alle thys a-raye ys for me broghte.' 1982), before he goes out to explore the city and its

surroundings, which are described at length. When he comes back to Melior in the evening, she explains that she chose this perfect setting and had the most magnificent city built, all for him and for his 'deduit et giu' (A 1734 *pleasure and play*), his 'playe' (2136): the city's entire purpose is his own pleasure.[28] All of this must have the desired effect of instilling in the young man a powerful sense of his own importance. Indeed, the construction of this sense of entitlement can be read as one of the main goals of his stay in Chef d'Oire. In this magical kingdom, the young man 'is encouraged to imagine himself as an adult and, more importantly, as the ruler he will one day be.'[29] But instead of being confronted with his potential future subjects and the city's administration, the life he leads there is one of pure, material pleasure. He enjoys Melior's (invisible) company every night and, during the day, is provided with access to hunting dogs, birds and horses, luxurious forests and rivers. Melior describes to him the noble dogs and birds he can use for his hunting amusement: she uses the adjective *gentil/gentyll* to refer to the animals (FR A 1792, 1797; ME 2211), thus emphasising the nobility of the activity and everything associated with it. The Middle English translator makes this link more explicit: when all the hounds run to Partonope because they have found a boar, the narrator writes: 'The crye to here yt were a feste/For an emperor an for a lorde' (2250-51). During his stay in Chef d'Oire, Partonopeu thus learns how to perform the social identity of the noble knight by participating in its pleasures.[30] As he cannot see anyone nor be seen, these pleasures are entirely material, sensual and aesthetic rather than social, yet they correspond to the social identity of the nobleman.

In both versions, Partonopeu's nobility is a key building block in the formation of his chivalric identity. Melior chose him for his nobility and his beauty, with the assumption that knightly 'prowess [is] expected as the corollary of his beauty'.[31] Partonopeu's noble lineage, as Vines notes, is presented as the very reason why he must pursue chivalry.[32] Melior, who takes on the role of mentor, reminds him of this noble lineage, which she invokes as a guarantee of his future knightly identity:

> Car ja li sans ne mentira,
> Mais Nature tos tans fera.
> Ne souferra la gentillece

> Que ja faciés fors noblece. (A 1505-1508)
> *Because Blood will never lie, Nature will prevail and Gentility will never allow that you do anything without nobility.*

By this logic, as a descendant of Hector, who only loved chivalry (A 1501-03), Partonopeu too will prove a great and noble knight, since blood, nature and nobility never lie. In this passage, *sang*, *nature* and *gentillece*, which can mean nobility in both the social and moral sense, are personified as objective and innate qualities, which ensure that Partonopeu shall always behave nobly. The personification is removed in the English version, where Melior instead asks him to act in accordance with his noble blood, which means dedicating himself to knighthood: 'Loke ye sewe forþe þat no-belle blode,/And sette yowre herte euer in cheualry.' (1852-3). While the English translator diminishes somehow the passivity implied in the personification of blood nobility, both versions have Melior deliver an emotional rather than practical education. What matters here is that Partonopeu *love* chivalry, set his heart in it: he must adopt chivalric identity not through prowess and masculine validation yet, but through individual, emotional commitment. This request for commitment comes with a recipe on how to behave to be a good knight. This does not include fighting skills, but rather social skills for the performance of the social and moral identity of a knight.[33] She instructs him to be humble and pleasant with everyone, rich or poor, to give freely and be generous with knights – for which she will give him the material means – to honour God and the Holy Church and, finally, to be valiant in battle (FR A 1913-1930; ME 2405-2422).

The fact that the young man receives chivalric education and sponsorship by his lady is not uncommon in romance. A similar scenario is at play in the popular story of Lanval/Launfal. The hero, who is already an established knight, loses the favour of the king and queen and therefore both his material and social status at court. It is his fairy lover who provides him with the (mainly material) means to gain his identity back. During his secret love affair – he is forbidden to reveal the existence of his lady who remains invisible to anybody but him – he moves back and forth between the fairy's magical, and private, world and the 'masculine social' world of the court. In that way, he can enjoy

the fairy's company at night and perform his newly re-acquired social status in chivalric society during the day. In this fairy story, the knight regains his access to courtly society through his secret association with the fairy lover. The process does not entail a period of isolation until the very end of the story when he retires to a life of pleasure with his fairy mistress, forever removing himself from court.[34]

Partonopeu's education in the social behaviour of chivalry, on the other hand, is coterminous with his education in the private realm of love. Melior's teachings on chivalric behaviour form part of Partonopeu's life of sensual pleasures in Chef d'Oire: after a full day of hunting, he comes home and have his 'delit' (A 1857), 'joye and delyte' (2300) of Melior, followed by further 'joie' and play in the form of pleasant and educational speeches: 'Et de deduit et de grant sens/Et des fais de l'ancien tens' (A 1861-62 *And pleasant and meaningful stories of ancient history*), 'And she hym tellyth nobel storyes,/Off love of knyghthode olde victoryes./Hym to dyporte faste besyeth sche' (2307-09). The pleasure of chivalric education thus overlaps with sexual pleasure. Her teachings are part of the 'parler et juer et sentir' (A 1447), 'playe, speche, and felynge' (1806) that he can have of her. The young man's initiation to chivalric identity thus happens in complete isolation from chivalric, homosocial society: it relies uniquely on private, sensual and material pleasure.

After a year of 'joie bien pleniere' (A 1884), 'joye fulle playnere' (2353), thinking of nothing else than his personal pleasure, his lady and his hunting dogs, and thus forgetting 'de son païs/De ses parents, de ses ami' (A 1889-90 *of his land, his parents, his friends*), 'alle hys kynne' (2358), the young man remembers himself and where he comes from ('De soi qui est et dont est nés' A 1886). While his stay in Chef d'Oire was a key milestone in his identity formation, allowing him to become an adult and a nobleman, it isolated him from his community, making him lose sight of his group identity as Frenchman and count of Blois. With Melior, he discovers himself as an individual, a (noble)man and future husband and emperor through private gratification, but he must still realize his knightly identity within the 'masculine social' and through a demonstration of practical martial skills. As Aisling Byrne has shown, 'absolute gratification' in fairy lovers romances would only stunt narrative progression and therefore individual growth: the 'stasis of

fulfilled desire' can only last so long.[35] Partonopeu thus eventually asks Melior for the permission to go back to France and help the French army in its war against Sornegur. This long war episode offers an exclusively masculine space typical of the *chansons de geste*, where the young man can be seen and recognized as part of a 'brotherhood', a 'community of fighting men'.[36] Here, after a year immersed in sensual pleasures and social entitlement, Partonopeu appears to have somehow gained the skills necessary to discharge the duties of knighthood: he battles against Sornegur's army and quickly becomes an outstanding soldier and leader in the French army – although he has not yet been awarded the title of knight.

When he arrives in Blois, he is first welcomed by one of Melior's knights who brings him horses carrying gold and silver. The knight explains that he should now behave like a knight, and do everything that knights do, except actually becoming one: 'Ses vos envoie Melior,/Et prie vos d'armes porter,/De tornoier et de joster,/Fors que ne soiés cevaliers.' (A 2010-13 *Melior sends you these and requests that you bear arms, tourney and joust, but without becoming knighted*; ME 2544-2549). This is a key aspect of the plot: Melior wants to be the one to 'çaindre l'espee' (A 2015), to gird his sword (ME 2551-2), on the day of their wedding. Partonopeu's official identity as a knight is thus dependent on his lady and on his own status as a lover. The intersection of chivalric identity with that of lover is a prerequisite of medieval romance: knightly prowess must be inspired and witnessed by a lady. In the Partonopeu story, this link is made explicit and official as the protagonist can only be knighted by his lady.

In France, he acts like a knight and becomes recognized as a worthy warrior and generous leader. However, Partonopeu then goes through a dramatic loss of identity and must reacquire both his identities of lover and nobleman before he can formally acquire the status of knighthood through a dubbing ceremony. Having betrayed his lover's command to never trying to see her, Partonopeu is first chased out of Chef d'Oire, before leaving his own family, knights and home in Blois to disappear into the forest – the same forest where he got lost at the start of his identity quest. During his suicidal wandering in the Ardennes, he becomes unrecognizable: he is dirty and extremely thin, his hair is long and messy and when Urraque, Melior's sister, finds him she first

identifies him as a 'caitis' (A 5952 *slave or exiled; by extension a miserable*), 'caytif' (7296). Here, Partonopeu suffers a self-imposed loss of identity, consciously describing himself as a miserable and an outcast ('un bricon', 'un musart' A 5995; 'a knave/a brothel, an oute-caste fro all thing' 7356-7). The terms used here imply a change in his social identity: from aristocratic knight and lover, he is become a social outcast and a poor miserable. This form of violent retreat out of society into wilderness and the incumbent loss of social identity is a common result of love betrayal in medieval romance. Such 'flight to wilderness', as Robert Hanning puts it, is a 'metaphor for the flight from the self' that the hero has started to hate.[37] Hanning assimilates this episode to the famous madness episode found in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*. There is an important difference between the two exiles, however: while Partonopeu 'assumes the appearance of the madman' he does not seem to lose his mind.[38] Yvain explicitly loses his reason and his senses on top of his social identity: when he is finally found, naked in the forest, by a lady, he has no memories of his mad episode.[39] In the Partonopeu romance, on the other hand, the protagonist loses his social identity of nobleman, knight and lover but not his senses: this identity loss is self-enacted. Because he adopted chivalric identity by emotionally committing to it rather than through 'objective' masculine validation, he can also consciously, subjectively, uncommit.

This different type of identity loss also means a different form of recovery. When the lady finds Yvain in the forest, he is unconscious: she covers him with an unguent that makes 'la rage et la melencolie' (3007 *the rage and melancholy*) disappear from his brain and lays clothes next to him before leaving, only coming back when he is dressed and back to his senses. The knight thus first comes back to himself and gets dressed in proper clothing before he has any social interaction. After that, the young woman brings him back to her lady's castle, where they wash and feed him, and procure him armour and a horse. The emphasis is on getting the knight his physical strength back: 'Qui tant a esté sojornez/Qu'an sa force fu retornez' (3155-6 *Who stayed there until he was back to his old strength*). Women thus restore his mental health and his physical strength and appearance, yet as soon as this is done, he will reclaim his knightly identity through the display of prowess within a masculine social space. After a very short convalescence,

knightly action literally comes knocking at the door: thieves attack the castle. Yvain goes out after them and violently kills one of them, after which he is soon recognized by the knights of the castle as a great knight. It is this validation of male peers that actualizes the recovery of his social, knightly identity, not womanly care and his passive stay in the feminine private realm.

Partonopeu, on the other hand, is conscious and conversant when Urraque finds him in the forest. He knows who he is – or was – but refuses to be that person anymore, answering 'traitor' when Urraque asks him for his name (FR A 6001-2; ME 7367). The gracious lady still reveals who she is, however, which brings about her own recognition of Partonopeu. Fearing for his life, she decides to lie to him and tell him that Melior has forgiven him and loves him, thus effectively restoring his identity as lover and as a man.[40] The second step is to reconstruct his identity as a knight – or more precisely as a young warrior ready to be knighted – which primarily involves a physical transformation and a lot of leisure. In contrast with Yvain, who remains in the presence of women just long enough to get back on his feet and into the masculine world of knightly aggression, Partonopeu recovers his social identity through an extended and pleasurable stay in the sole company of women: Urraque and Persewis, a cousin of the two sisters who falls madly in love with Partonopeu. Urraque brings the young man to Salence, a small, paradisal island full of vegetation and crowned with a magnificent palace. Critics have often contrasted Salence to Chef d'Oire as a more simple and natural setting, a fertile *locus amoenus*, where the empty Chef d'Oire represents sterility and artifice.[41] The two places nonetheless seem to perform the same function: establish (or restore) Partonopeu's social identity through private, material, and sensual pleasures. Urraque makes sure that nobody else on the island can see or talk to him except her and Persewis (FR A 6214; ME 7606-7) and that all his desires are satisfied: 'Molt i sejorne a grant delit/Et tot a son plaisir i vit.' (A 6199-6200 *He remains there pleasurably, living only for his pleasure*), 'She made hym have all maner delite' (7590). Much of this pleasure comes from the fake love letters that Urraque forges for him. The rest has to do with restoring his appearance through care and luxury: the ladies patiently untangle his hair, or, in the English version,

wash it so that it goes back to its natural colour, and dress him with the most beautiful clothes.

Finally, Urraque provides him with extraordinary armour, which is described in great material detail as being the best and the finest that he has ever seen. When he tries it on, thus effectively putting on the costume of the knight in the scene that precedes his dubbing, he is still in the sole company of the two doting women. Once he is armed and mounted, Partonopeu goes out to test his armour and his horse and, more prominently, to offer a spectacle of knightly glamour to the two maidens. Indeed, the narration focuses on Urraque's and Persewis' admiring gaze: the French narrator explains how Persewis falls deeper in love as the suit of armour makes him look even more beautiful (A 6893-95) and the English adaptor repeats how much they enjoy seeing him ride and how he is the most beautiful armed man they have ever seen (8440-45). Overall, the construction of his physical identity as a knight taking place in this scene is focalized through their loving, feminine eyes; here, his armour, horse and shield – all the attributes needed for the military function of knighthood – only serve to enhance his attractiveness as a lover.

When he finally officially becomes a knight and is girded by Melior herself, it is indeed his identity as lover that prevails. Excited and terrified at seeing his beloved again, the young man behaves more like a conventional lovesick lover than a lusty and valiant knight, turning red and lowering his head for shame, and fleeing to his room to vent his anguish as soon as it is done. The Middle English version expands the portrait of the typical lovesick lover, emphasizing his complex emotional state through his changing hue (8973). During the final tournament, Partonopeu offers a perfect display of knightly prowess ignited by love. Yet he ultimately wins Melior's hand not because he is the best knight, but because he is the prettiest. The tournament indeed ends with a beauty contest, in which the final competitors are stripped of their suits of armour. Partonopeu thus approaches the panel of judges unarmed, wearing only a tunic and girdle: his beauty and his shamefulness are emphasized over his manliness or prowess. Once again, the English translator dwells on Partonope's emotional state and how it is visually expressed on his face (12063-68). Bruckner argues that 'the transformation of the tournament into a kind of beauty contest has

the effect of intertwining beauty and prowess, birth and individual performance, as complementary, rather than contradictory, values, equally necessary in a comprehensive social system.'[42] The tournament indeed brings together the different facets that form knightly identity and that are successively emphasized throughout the romance. It also reconciles the feminine, private sphere with the masculine, social one. Ultimately, however, the fact that Partonopeu is successful because of his beauty highlights the unusual role that (aesthetic) pleasure, female desire, and male passivity and emotionality play in the construction of chivalric identity in this romance.

To conclude, the romance offers an original representation of the chivalric identity quest through its problematizing of knighthood as dependent on female influence and desire and its foregrounding of the private, feminine sphere as a locus of social, masculine formation. Whereas some critics have described Chef d'Oire as 'hedged round with prohibitions' and antagonistic to the social world of honour, turning the young man into a 'kept man' and Melior's 'powerless dependent', I argue that it is the place of both the fulfilment of his personal desires and the construction of his social identity.[43] Before he becomes a knight in practice – by fighting in a war and eventually being formally dubbed – Partonopeu constructs his knightly identity not by acquiring the skills necessary for performing knighthood as a military function, but by adopting the social identity of a nobleman, involving spending considerable leisure time dedicated to hunting, lovemaking and cultivating a sense of self-importance. Pleasure becomes a crucial notion, bringing together the identity strands of lover and of nobleman (both necessary in chivalry), reunited in a sense of gratification and entitlement. Similarly, in Salence, the preparation for the social rite of passage that is knighting consists in building Partonopeu's confidence up again as an attractive young man and a successful lover. The Middle English adaptation follows the Old French plot closely and also posits personal, private gratification as the key building block to the young man's construction of his social status as nobleman, lover and, ultimately, knight. I therefore do not wish to overstate the differences between the two versions. However, a comparative approach helps highlight the significant and unusual elements of the original romance. The translator's unease with the emphasis on pleasure and aestheticism

or with the hero's young age and attractiveness is one such indicator. The Middle English version indeed constructs Partonope's knightly identity with more emphasis on manly behaviour and less on his status as an object of contemplation and desire; in doing so it makes more explicit the hero's emotional transformation from *chylde* to man, and on to lover-knight.

Notes

1 This research was generously supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

2 Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 109.

3 The twelfth-century Old French, anonymous romance *Partonopeu de Blois* was a remarkably popular text, which was continuously adapted throughout the Middle Ages, resulting in translations into at least six Western European languages. The romance is usually dated from around 1150-1180. It was long thought that the author of *Partonopeu* wrote after and under the influence of Chrétien de Troyes, but more recent studies have argued for the possibility of the romance to be a precursor of Chrétien. See Penny Eley and Penny Simons, '*Partonopeus de Blois* and Chrétien de Troyes: A Re-Assessment', *Romania*, 117 (1999), 316-341.

4 Two Middle English versions exist, one which exists only in fragmentary form (only 308 verses are extant) and which departs from the Old French narrative structure, and a longer version, which follows the French plot faithfully and which is the one this article studies.

5 Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*, (Oxford, 2004), see pp. 30 and 130.

6 Gaunt, p. 108.

7 Gaunt, p. 96.

8 See Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, 1977), p. 215.

9 See Gaunt, p. 109.

10 On the romance's 'fusion' of genres see Penny Eley, *Partonopeus de Blois. Romance in the Making* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 6-7.

11 Brenda Hosington, 'Voices of Protest and Submission: Portraits of Women in *Partonopeu de Blois* and its Middle English Translation', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 17 (1991), 51-75 (pp. 65 and 70).

12 Eley, p. 20.

13 I use Olivier Collet and Pierre-Marie Joris (ed. and trans.), *Le roman de Partonopeu de Blois* (Paris, 2005). Modern English translations are mine.
14 Penny Eley and Penny Simons, 'Male Beauty and Sexual Orientation in *Partonopeus de Blois*', *Romance Studies*, 17 (1999), 41-56 (pp. 45-49).
15 Gretchen Mieszkowski, 'Urake and the Gender Roles of *Partonope of Blois*', *Mediaevalia*, 25 (2004), 181-195 (pp. 182-83).
16 Mieszkowski, p. 183.
17 For the Middle English version, I use Trampe A. Bödtker (ed.), *The Middle-English versions of Partonope of Blois* (Oxford, 1912). Electronic Edition (Cambridge, 1992).
18 On (reversed) gender roles in the romance's depiction of the love story, see Matilda Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 109-156; and Mieszkowski.
19 The words *masculinité* or *virilité* do not appear in twelfth-century French literature. The examples found in the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* all date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
20 Derek Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2009), p. 195.
21 Cooper, p. 30. On the preference for direct speech and dialogue over descriptions see for example A. C. Spearing's detailed analysis of English translations of Marie de France's *lais*. Spearing, 'Marie de France and her Middle English Adaptors', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 12 (1990), 117-156. Sif Rikhardsdottir notices it with regards to the Partonopeu romance but does not comment on it further, arguing that both the Old French and the Middle English versions paint a realistic image of a scared, lost child. Rikhardsdottir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 2012), 123 and 136.
22 Albrecht Classen, in a study of the German version of the romance, argues that fear is a key element in the protagonist's quest for self and identity. Classen, 'The Struggle Against Fear as a Struggle for the Self in Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur*', *Mediaevalia*, 25 (2004), 225-252.
23 See Esperanza Bermejo, 'Chef d'Oire dans *Partonopeus de Blois*: La ville comme espace de totalisation', *Mediaeval Studies,* 63 (2001), 223-244 (p. 229).
24 Helen Cooper has argued that the representation of 'active female desire' is more characteristic of English than French romances, Cooper, p. 220. On the emphasis on Melior's active desire in the Middle English *Partonope* see Rikhardsdottir, pp. 141-142.

25 On the treatment of female reputation and honour in both versions of the romance see Ronald M. Spensley, 'The Courtly Lady in *Partonope of Blois*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 74 (1973), 288-291 and Hosington, pp. 56-57.
26 Amy Vines, 'Invisible Woman: Rape as Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance', in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by A. Hopkins, A. Rouse and C. J. Rushton (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 161-80 (p. 174).
27 Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, *La Tentation de l'Orient dans le roman médiéval. Sur l'imaginaire médiéval de l'Autre* (Paris, 2003), p. 57.
28 As Amy Vines notes, this justifies the long description of the city at the beginning of the episode: 'These resources are not present merely to be admired or wondered at, but are marshaled for Partonope's pleasure and use.' Vines, *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 93.
29 Vines, *Women's Power*, p. 93.
30 Vines goes against critics who see this sojourn in Chef d'Oire as a period of sheer inactivity and dependence with no chivalric development, by arguing that it is a 'crucial element of Partonope's education where his tutor and lover provides him with the personal experience and chivalric lessons he needs to succeed.' I agree with Vines and would argue further that the very inactivity that characterises his stay is part of the formation of his knightly and noble identity. Amy Vines, 'A Woman's "Crafte": Melior as Lover, Teacher, and Patron in the Middle English Partonope of Blois', *Modern Philology*, 105 (2007), 245-270 (p. 258).
31 Bruckner, p. 120.
32 Vines, 'Woman's "Crafte"', p. 255.
33 Ryan Naughton, in his thesis 'The construction of Knightly Identity in late Middle English Romances' ProQuest Dissertation Publishing (Ann Arbor, 2010), demonstrates 'the primacy of lineage and natural nobility in the matrix of knightly identity construction', but also argues 'that the performance of a particular social role is key in constructing and maintaining an individual knight's knightly identity' (p. 12). He thus defines 'natural nobility' as stemming both from 'lineage and proper behavior' (p. 17).
34 On the power and influence of the fairy lover in Marie de France's *Lanval* and Thomas Chestre's Middle English *Sir Launfal*, see Vines, *Women's Power*, pp. 115-140.
35 Aisling Byrne, 'Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance', in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by

A. Hopkins, A. Rouse and C. J. Rushton (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 99-110 (pp. 105 and 109).

36 Gaunt, pp. 23 and 26.

37 Hanning, p. 216.

38 Hanning, p. 82.

39 Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, 3022-25, from Daniel Poirion (dir.), *Chrétien de Troyes. Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1994). All subsequent quotes are from this edition, English translations are mine.

40 Gretchen Mieszkowski argues that 'by telling Partonope that Melior loves him as he needs to be loved, as "hir lorde," her husband, no longer as her kept man, Urake liberates his manliness.' Mieszkowski, p. 186.

41 See Hanning, p. 87 and Hosington, p. 62.

42 Bruckner, p. 131.

43 Hanning, p. 215; Mieszkowski, p. 184.