

Lost in Translation: Medieval Romance, the Porous Female Body, Kingship, and Vassalage in *Havelok the Dane*

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Abstract:

Medieval romances feature many of the same tropes: reclamation of lost or forsworn titles, martial prowess, bravery squandered, damsels in desperate need of distress or saving. *Havelok the Dane* participates in these conventions but is a dramatic outlier in the way the author utilizes the female body as trope, narrative plot device, and ultimately as a signifier for kingship itself. The original version, Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis*, emphasizes Havelok's supernatural and superhuman power, his kingship ordained by God, his birthmark, and his heirs. The English poet changes the source in his translation, dramatically strengthening the plotline around the visceral, physical threats to women. Instead, the increased threat of rape, the fecundity of female bodies, and the "porous" nature of females in the *Lay* foreground and become the story; the potential and real violence toward the women of the text create the foil to contemporary Arthurian romances.

Keywords: medieval romance, rape, sexualized violence, *Havelok the Dane*, Chretien de Troyes, kingship, vassalage

The Arthurian Context for *Havelok the Dane*

From dispossessed prince to fisherman's son to king of Denmark and England, the journey of the hero in *Havelok* corresponds to the well-known trope of reclamation that other medieval romances of the period exemplify: the angst-filled themes of loss of power, lands, and birthright (Ashton 2010; Gaunt and Kay 2008). Numerous other narratives reflect and reinforce these tropes: *King Horn* battles Saracens for his father's ancestral lands; *Erec and Enide* warns that dallying in the marriage bed too long dulls the war-like spirit and prevents the reclamation of one's birthright; *Cliges* narrates the story of a young hero who gains fame by defeating the Duke of Saxony in single combat for possession of Fenice, whom he eventually steals from his uncle Alis.

The interstices of medieval and Arthurian romances explore the themes of reclamation and masculinity, placing at their heart the role of women, especially in the context of sexual violence and the lack of consent, all important topics in the understanding and interpretation of these romances

(Samuelson 2022). *Havelok the Dane* inherits the same Arthurian preoccupations with rule in the middle ages—or at least power for a marginally successful knight—that required martial prowess to operate as a signifier of power and legitimate rule, ordained through the wooing of suitable maiden in courtship (Knapp 2017; Gaunt 2000). Not only were women secondary in this equation, but they became what Eve Sedgwick called “the object of mimetic desire” in her landmark essay “Between Men” (Yeager 1985). The travails and suffering “between men,” however, culminate with their reward and return to normalcy in the form of a wedding that solidifies personal, cultural, and economic worth.

Yet significant scholarship has now investigated how the canon of Arthurian and medieval romance relies on what Kathryn Gravdal has called “The poetics of rape,” as “sexual violence is built into the very premise of Arthurian romance,” especially in the context of Chretien de Troyes’ Arthurian romance cycle (Gravdal 1991b, 43; 2011, 42). The consistent tropes of the threat of sexual violence even within courtly contexts were not only part of the genre (Sarah 2010); in some sense, they *were the genre* as Franco-Flemish marginalia from the thirteenth century seem to illustrate (Shartrand 2020). Albrecht Classen has even noticed how King Arthur himself undergoes a changing destiny in the verse narratives, as his mythic persona becomes overshadowed and underappreciated (Classen 2024). This might be due to the role of Arthurian knights who carry all the action of the romances, move throughout the realm in their escapades, and rely on the threat of violence to women; they solidify the theme of sexual violence as part of the medieval romance genre.

The Interpretative Lenses of *Havelok the Dane*

The Lay of Havelok the Dane employs many medieval romance tropes, especially those of Arthurian origin, but it differs significantly from the contemporary romances of the period by emphasizing to a much larger degree the social obligations of kingship and the connection to the role that the female body plays.

The peculiarity of the poem, especially in terms of the narrative structure and the tropes employed, has piqued the interest of many scholars, which has inspired multiple lenses to view the piece. Donna Crawford has noticed how Havelok’s body is particularly vulnerable to harm as the gruesome wounds and remarkable recovery illustrates (Crawford 2002b). Henk Aertsen has argued that though medieval romances narrate the adventures of a hero followed by a love scene in which the two are married, Havelok stands out due to its lack of courtly tone, absence of a noble hero, and the lack of love (Veldhoen and Aertsen 1988, 1995). Havelok is less courtly and far more of a violent adventure novel of the period. Ken Eckert argues that the inconsistencies in the poem ultimately contribute to the “halo effect” that Havelok casts about so that his martial prowess ties into an overall positive outcome for all his subjects (Eckert 2015). For many critics, *Havelok the Dane* connects to contemporary articulations of kingship. John Halverson, for instance, maintains that Havelok represents a peasant fantasy of kingship common to the time, a class-conscious poem composed for “middle class” wish fulfillment with its tales of thralls, the lowest of social ranks, made knights and barons (Halverson 1971).

Indeed, Havelok, unlike so many of his peasant brethren, is not featured as a villain or rough brigand as Paul Freedman has noticed of so many other romance texts (Freedman 1999). Sheila Ishkarian takes a different approach by defining “the nature of kingship in the person of its eponymous hero” as well as the limitations of power through contractual notions (Ishkarian 1974, 294). Still others locate Havelok in the tradition of nationalism as Dominique Battles found convincing evidence that Havelok offers a glimpse of distinct Englishness (Dominique 2012). There is certainly truth to these interpretations of kingship in the poem as well as the importance of kingship as a central theme.

The French sources highlight these themes of kingship and pre-nationalism, but the unknown Middle English poet alters his French sources in significant ways: he accentuates the violence and the threat of violence to women; he enlarges the queen’s role as heir to England and birth-mother to a new generation of nobility; he emphasizes the body politic in intimate connection to the female body and the proliferation of power. Earlier versions of the poem, either in oral or written form, do not stress in such great detail the female characters. These changes were not made by mere chance or a throw of the dice, for the *Havelok* poet had access and—almost certainly—utilized the French sources of the poem in the composition process. (Kleinman 2003; Bradbury 1993).

Violence and Kingship

Building on these critics’ thorough studies, we see how the poem directly connects to the portrayal of bodies and the body politic. Harkening back to John of Salisbury’s well-known treatise, the *Policraticus*, the poet connects the kingdom, the king, and the actual country into one being (John of Salisbury and Markland 1979). The introduction begins with the dying of two kings, symbols of two countries soon to be stricken by the death of their sovereigns. Athelwold, caught up in the spiritual realm, begins to forsake the physical by whipping his body till it bleeds, taking mass, and facilitating the inheritance of his daughter Goldeboru. Likewise, the near-death Birkabeyn, the King of Denmark, sends advisors to facilitate an interim government until Havelok can assume power. The text presents two ideals of kingship, two attempted ceremonies of swearing homage on the *Bible* to foster children (with Godard and Godrich), two countries thrown into disruption by mirrored usurpers to the respective thrones.

The themes of kingship and power cannot be ignored, especially as it begins with a botched transfer of power with the physical, bodily representation of submission to the greater power of the sovereign, punctuated by kneeling below the king and placing their hands between those of their ailing sovereigns. Liam Purdon, though, noticed the failure of the swearing-in ceremony because of its curtailment: Godrich and Godard only swear homage, which is only one component of three in the full rite of vassalage (Purdon 1993).¹

To be truly legal Godard and Godrich would have to swear homage, declare fealty, and then receive their fiefs from the new rulers. The poet stresses that Godard and Godrich only declare homage to their lords, promising to raise these children to inheritance age; neither Godard nor Godrich swear oaths directly to the heirs themselves, a critical loophole within the feudal contract through which

the industrious usurpers can squeeze (Treharne and Sanders 1973).² This would be akin to the President of the United States failing to take the oath of office as prescribed.

The important role of fealty (“manred”) to the poem surfaces again when Godard breaks his oath and takes control of the realm for himself (Treharne and Sanders 1973). The poet sets the stage for the importance of inheritance and genealogy from the outset with the two kings’ concerns for their children and continues to be pivotal to the remainder of the poem, especially when reconceived in the frame narrative when Havelok and Goldeboru successfully procreate to produce fifteen offspring.

Godard fully participates in the neglectful and vengeful regent trope, his wards nearly on the brink of starvation. This is where the poem digresses to issues of the female body and its use for formulating the potential actions of the characters. Godard the regent has systematically used the pathos of the two starving sisters to convince Havelok to abdicate the throne, forcing Havelok into action ultimately through the murder of the two girls. The scene is laden with pathos as the children,

For us hungreth swith sore
We ne have to hete—ne we ne have
Her-inne neyther knith ne knave
That yeveth us drinken ne no mete (Shepherd 1995, 15)

At this point Godard grabs the two young girls and violence ensues:

Of bothen he karf on two here throtes,
And sithen hem al to grotas.
Ther was sorwe, wo-so it sawe,
Hwan the children bi the wawe
Leyen and sprauleden in the blod” (Shepherd 1995, 16).

A stark reminder to the Herod of the mystery plays, the pathos-laden scene centers on the bodies of two small girls, not on any boys. This is a pre-figuration of scenes throughout the poem in which violence or the threat of violence to girls and women forces direct political action by Havelok.

Havelok does not respond with sword in hand. Instead, he asks for “manrede” or vassalage from Godard. The portrayal of this scene would have been very stark, especially considering the connection of the body politic with the body of the king. The would-be king would have received in his bloody hands the hands of Havelok, forced to deny his patrimony:

Al Denemark I wile you yeve
To that forward thu late me live...
Sweren I wole that Birkabein
Nevere yete me ne gat!” (Shepherd 1995, 16)

Purdon argues that Godard rethinks his desire to murder Havelok precisely because the oath of vassalage would be legally appealing (Purdon 1993). By claiming a legitimate rite of vassalage from Havelok, Godard legally forces the other earls into submission.

He ponders this prospect briefly even as the girls' blood drips on the floor. Interestingly, Godard refuses to kill Havelok with his own hands perhaps because those same hands just received Havelok's oath of vassalage in the form of placing the boy's hands between his own in an act of submission: by enfolding the vassal's hands, the liege lord vows to protect the vassal just as the vassal vows to serve. Vassalage is legally binding and Havelok's quick thinking forces Godard to rethink his own plans (Henk Aertsen 1988; Hanning 1967).³

The French and English Sources

The female body functions as a narrative strategy the poet uses to progress from scene to scene, beginning with the slaying of the sisters, moving onto the queen's body as part of contemporary articulations of rape, inheritance and marriage that focus on the sexuality of her body and on her role as the fount of an entirely new generation—bypassing the focus of mimetic desire that is seen in other poems of the period. Kathryn Gravdal correctly identified themes of rape and potential sexual violence toward women as tropes in Arthurian romance (Gravdal 2011); *Havelok the Dane*, however, takes these tropes and turns them into narrative projection, as the bodies of women appear to motivate nearly every significant action at every stage of the poem.

The particular focus on violence towards women can be seen in the purposeful changes made from French sources to English poem. Neither French source, Gaimar's *L'Estoire des Engleis* nor the *Lai d' Havelok*, mention two young sisters at all, let alone portray such a gruesome death for them. In fact, Havelok's childhood (called Cuaran in *L'Estoire* and the *Lai*) remains entirely underdeveloped in the French sources (H. Aertsen and Veldhoen 1995; Smithers 1988).⁴ No pathetic scene of starving girls exists in these two works. Instead, Cuaran, which means scullion in Breton, begins life as a servant in Gaimar's poem, excising his childhood altogether along with his two sisters (Smithers 1988). The *Lai* portrays the two-year-old Havelok fleeing with his mother the queen, brought to Grimsby by *baron* Grim. In the French sources Grim has three unnamed sons but no daughters. Why would the Middle English poet introduce the two sisters and portray such violence against them when they don't appear in his sources? Why develop Havelok's childhood so fully?

The girls' deaths may show the depth of Godard's depravity, but they also function in multiple ways in the poem. They mirror the two marriages of Grim's daughters orchestrated by Havelok at the end of the poem as women throughout the poem function to secure his rights. Havelok loses two sisters but regains substitutes when he attaches himself to the household of Grim. The poet uses their child deaths in the structure of the poem to show the boyish weak Havelok forced to offer *manred* in the sight of his dead sisters, which is later juxtaposed to the fully functional king Havelok who rightfully distributes fiefs, wealth, and women to those who deserve it in the sight of the drawn and quartered body of Godrich.

By killing the females, Godard insures that Havelok's line won't continue from that source. It

allows for Havelok's triumphant return, from fisherman's son to king, without the problem of two sisters sharing the resources of the realm. This sort of practice—the elision of females from the line of succession—was not uncommon during the period (Waugh 1988)⁵. Excising the girls from the poem provides for a more tragic life and a more dramatic confrontation with Godard, but a more financially secure alternative. This also leads logically to his offer of *manred* in which he promises to deny his patrimony in his last sentence: “Sweren I wole that Bircabeyn/ Nevere yete me ne gat!” (Shepherd 1995, 16).

When Havelok swears *manred*, he offers to bring no force or spears against Godard, to flee Denmark, but most importantly, to deny his father and his inheritance. The violent death of his sisters forces him to renounce his patrimony, but it also leaves the reader with the feeling that their deaths, although terrible, remain only secondary to the affront of forcing Havelok to deny his father and his feudal rights. No deaths of girls equals no *manred* and no poem.

These lost sisters continue the discussion of genealogy the poet began. Godrich imprisons, but does not torture, Goldeboru precisely because he wishes to enthrone his own son: “Ich have a sone, a ful fayr knave:/ He shal Engelond al have;/ He shal ben King; he shal ben sire,/ So brouke I evere mi blake swire” (Shepherd 1995, 11; H. Aertsen and Veldhoen 1995, 11). Curious that Goldeboru remains unmolested, but a raped queen, as the end of the poem tells, can be no queen at all.

The death of the young girls inaugurates the narrative transition to Havelok's tenure with Grim—and to some extent a further investigation into the body politic of Havelok's own body. By divine signs Grim notices Havelok's royalty and decides not to drown him. This, according to Donna Crawford, focuses on the divine of Havelok's body as it “becomes a site for playing out the contest for dominance within the body politic” (Crawford 2002a, 5). There is certainly some truth to this. Echoing Ernst Kantorowicz's formulation of the multiplicities of the political body and the physical body, Crawford argues that Havelok's bodily affirmation is part of this theme (Kantorowicz 1957).⁶

This dual portrayal of Havelok is undoubtedly true for this section of the poem whereby he must prove himself to be a likely candidate for the assumption of the throne. One proof is the proper use of vassalage. After the miraculous signs of his body, Grim immediately offers Havelok his service in a “true” scene of vassalage directly juxtaposed to that which was performed by the two usurpers. Grim and his family—already loyal barons in the French versions—prove loyal servants for the rest of the poem and are ennobled at the end when Havelok performs the third and final stage of vassalage with the distribution of titles. This performance of vassalage, of course, is directly juxtaposed to the breaking of oaths by Godard, Grimsby's serfdom, and the general barbaric nature of Grim that is possibly tied to folk tale (Mills 1967, 220-230).

The Journey of Reclamation

Havelok's journey continues toward reclaiming his lost crown in Grim's fishing hut, built on the shores of England after he fled Denmark. In the French version, Grim constructs his house out of the remains of his boat which was attacked by pirates along the way, but the English version begins to highlight Havelok's noble origins through the use of the upwardly mobile peasant who finds, due

to famine, that he must seek work in Lincoln to continue his path of reclamation (Levine 1992).⁷ This is a man of distinct values, who consumes almost four times as much food as anyone else, echoing the rate of consumption of noble to peasant during the period, who wishes to “swive” for his food as any true noble ought to fulfill his bond as lord. Like the Knight in *Piers Plowman* who first offers to till the field but is persuaded by Piers that he should protect the land and its inhabitants, Havelok sets out to do what he can from a low position in the hierarchy. Even though Havelok cannot “protect” Grim as the Knight does in *Piers Plowman*, he attempts to participate in the feudal order in much the same way by working for his share of the market, which happens to be four times as much as anyone else, within the three estates model: those who work, those who pray, those who fight.

In Lincoln, despite working for a cook, Havelok upholds the feudal bond of servant and master as he refuses payment for his efforts, asking only food for his belly: “‘Goddot!’ quoth he, ‘leve sire,/ Bidde ich you non other hire/ But yebeth me inow to ete;/ Fir and water I wile you fete,/ The fir blowe an ful wel maken’” (Shepherd 1995, 27; H. Aertsen and Veldhoen 1995, 27). Echoing the status quo feudal system in which the peasant labors for the lord for no other payment other than protection and food, Havelok shows his friendliness and worthiness (Ishkanian 1974).⁸

The early part of the poem features this journey of reclamation, and Havelok remains poor and prospect-less. In fact, this journey to Lincoln is the one real point of volition in the poem Havelok has not motivated by female characters. David Staines has noticed that Havelok remains an entirely passive character in the French versions, but undergoes a change into an active prince in the English poem, a transformation that may tie into the nascent manuals on the education of princes (Staines 1976).⁹ But the female characters all but disappear from the narrative when the knave works as a cook’s assistant and honors the feudal bond of servant and master. All this soon changes, however.

The Female Body as Narrative Apparatus

The English *Havelok* differs markedly from the French sources and offers a female body that operates as central narrative apparatus; like Arthurian romance, she propels the plot in significant ways. The English Havelok is forced into the stone throwing contest, is forced to marry Goldeboru, and is forced by threat of her rape to leave for Grimsby. She continues to occupy the plot when Godrich gives Goldeboru to the “strongest” man, which forces Havelok into an upward arc to regain his kingship. At the same time, Godrich uses Goldeboru, who was well beyond the marriageable age of twelve, to rid himself of an unwanted heir by pawning her to a knave.

Their marriage is symbolic for the breakdown of social relations in the poem and participates in contemporary discussions of misalliance. While Havelok has performed at all levels of the feudal hierarchy and has followed the code of conduct for each level, Godrich breaks his code by compelling both Havelok and Goldeboru into the sham marriage. In an ironic pre-figuration of the king’s power Havelok is to justly yield, Godrich distributes the “goods” of his land to whomever he wishes, a traditional right bestowed upon the king. Similar to the final act of vassalage mentioned earlier (Purdon 1993), the distribution of fiefs for Godrich represents an ironic performance as legitimate ruler, and Goldeboru

turns into the chattel to reaffirm the feudal relationship. Like the country at large which Godrich holds by martial force, he also forces Havelok and Goldeboru to marry against their wills (Gravdal 1991a).¹⁰

Close Reading the Threat of Rape in the English Havelok

Once the two are espoused by the Archbishop of York in ironically the same way the real king and queen would be married, Havelok finds himself taskless. The French texts diverge from the English *Havelok* here in interesting ways. In all three versions a dream sequence occurs after consummation, but the Middle English version differs dramatically in content and form from its French predecessors.

The first French version by Gaimar entails a narrative where Cuaran (Havelok) pays Argentille (Goldeboru) little attention in bed, briefly consummates the marriage, and Argentille dreams of a bear hunt, a boar killing the bear, some foxes, and a Cuaran, who climbs a tree when the ocean threatened to engulf him and two lions submitted themselves to Cuaran. Argentille wakes, sees the light shining from Cuaran's mouth, and he interprets her dream as anticipation for the preparations for King Godrich's feast that would take place on the following day.

The second French version with The *Lai d'Havelok* echoes Gaimar's rendition in many ways. In the *Lai*, Argentille has a similar dream of forest animals fighting, fleeing and submitting; Cuaran interprets the dream as a preparation for the feast. However, Argentille then consults a hermit about the dream who informs her that Cuaran is of noble birth and would be king. The hermit advises her to journey to Cuaran's kin in Grimsby to learn the real truth. These two versions reflect a more traditional, "courtly" content of medieval romances; the stock hermit finds his way into the *Lai*, whereas Gaimar shows concerns over appearance, class and poverty. The French versions rely heavily on dream sequences to propel the story.

The Middle English *Havelok* changes the scene significantly as the poet postpones the dream sequence until they return to Grimsby and his kin, and introduces the threat of Goldeboru's rape; in fact, rape figures *predominately* in the next section of the poem because unlike the *Lai* in which a hermit explains the necessary steps the couple should take or *L'Estoire* in which Goldeboru can't stand poverty, they leave Lincoln solely because Havelok fears for Goldeboru's safety:

That fel Havelok ful wel on thought—
Men sholde don his leman shame,
Or elles bringen in wicke blame,
That were him levere to ben ded.
Forthi he token another red,
That thei sholden thenne fle
Til Grim, and til hise sones thre (Shepherd 1995, 34) (italics mine).

Havelok would rather die than see his new bride brought into disrepute, and this theme recurs again and again.

Almost non-existent in the other versions, the Middle English *Havelok* transposes the threat

of rape into an important narrative transition, and from this point onward in the poem, Havelok can prove his martial prowess and kingly attributes in connection to and defense of Goldeboru. The French versions of the poem, which focus on the peasant/noble interaction of class, fail to enter into Goldeboru's decision to leave because the poem seems to honor Havelok for "swiving" for his food, following his lords' commands to gather wood and throw stones. The Middle English poet here changes his sources to widen the scope of the threat of rape to include the *motivation* for leaving Lincoln entirely.

Where both French texts include the dream sequence after consummation of the marriage while the two are still at Lincoln, the Middle English poem includes the dream only after the couple has fled to Grimsby because of potential "wicke blame". The exact order of events in the Middle English poem elucidate and support the role rape serves in the text.

First, at Grimsby the poet reiterates the themes of vassalage when Grim's sons swear homage to Havelok and offer all that they own, including themselves, to his service:

Thou mithe us bothe selle and yeve,
Thou mayt us bothe yeve and selle,
With that thou wilt here dwelle (Shepherd 1995, 35).

Like Grim, the sons echo his original vow;¹¹ but Grim promises to keep Havelok till he can "ride" and implies a strong hope for freedom:

Thoru other man,
loverd, than thoru the Sal I never freman be;
Thou shalt me, loverd, fre maken,
For I shal yemen the and waken—
Thoru the wile I fredom have! (Shepherd 1995, 20).

The sons, however, offer up complete submission, including all their ample possessions, in an unequivocal rite of vassalage. This represents the first unambiguous rite of vassalage in which the sons offer everything without condition.¹²

Second, while in bed, Goldeboru worries that she has been married to a thrall, connecting to the class theme prevalent in the text. She sees the light issuing from Havelok's mouth, notices the noble cross on his shoulder, and finally overhears a voice of an angel. In this annunciation scene the angel tells her:

Goldeborw, lat thi sorwe be!
For Havelok, that haveth spuset the,
He is kinges sone and kinges eyr—
That bi-kenneth that croiz so fayr...
Thanne she havede herd the stevene
Of the angel uth of hevене,

She was so fele sithes blithe
That she ne mithe hire joie mythe,
But Havelok sone anon she kiste (Shepherd 1995, 36).

No annunciation exists in either source text and arguably exists here as merely another proof of Havelok's royal identity.¹ But we should not forget the original purpose of the annunciation to Mary which was to inform her of the lineage of her child.

The annunciation foreshadows Goldeboru's purpose as birthmother to fifteen children, who all become kings and queens, and, indeed, she kisses Havelok forthwith on their marriage bed. The angel's message takes the place of the hermit's message in the *Lai*, emphasizing the procreative ability of Goldeboru. Gaimar's version has no message at all. The Middle English poet elevates the discussion of Goldeboru from mere queen-in-waiting to a Mary figure who will help cement peace in both Denmark and England through her progeny.

After the annunciation, Goldeboru kisses Havelok and he awakes braying and expounds his wondrous dream. Unlike the French sources, Goldeboru no longer has the allegorical beast fable dream, but instead Havelok dreams that he grows into a giant—a literal representation of *The King's Two Bodies*—that captures both Denmark and England within his hands (Kantorowicz 1957):

Me thouthe I was in Denemark set,
But on on the moste hil
That evere yete kam I til.
It was so hey that I wel mouthe
Al the werd se, als me thouthe.
Als I sat upon that lowe
I bigan Denemark for-to awe,
The borwes and the castles stronge;
And mine armes weres so longe
That I fadmede al at ones
Denemark with mine longe bones. (Shepherd 1995, 36)

According to Kantorowicz, the Middle Ages had “a distinction between *corpus uerum*—the tangible body of an individual person [king or prelate]—and *corpus fictum*, the corporate collective which was intangible and existed only as a fiction of jurisprudence” (Kantorowicz 1957, 209). Here, the mystical body of the king, the representation of the indissoluble king, joins with the corporeal body when Havelok literally becomes both concepts and both bodies in one. The transformation only occurs after he has cemented his claim to the land with the consummation with Goldeboru.

Power, vassalage, and kingship in the English Havelok depend on Goldeboru as narrative propulsion because he gains status 1) right after Goldeboru accepts him as her true husband and kisses

him, giving the moment thematic importance, and 2) in Havelok's second dream he gathers up England to give to Goldeboru as a (dowry) present. Havelok's nobility receives its' validation from God (in the form of divine signs and his dream) but is legitimized by his marriage and his metaphorical dowry. As the couple consummate their marriage, Havelok also consummates his marriage to the realm in the form of his dreams. The body politic blends with the queenly body.

The Vulnerable Female Body

The threatened rape of Goldeboru followed by the eventual consummation of the marriage echoes the canonistic metaphor of kingly marriage to the *polis* common during the period. This metaphor, according to Ernst Kantorowicz, was transferred to secular institutions and was quite common in the thirteenth century as evinced by Cynus of Pistoai:

And the comparison between the corporeal matrimony and the intellectual one is good: for just as the husband is called the defender of his wife... so is the emperor the defender of that Respublica (Kantorowicz 1957, 212-213).

Additionally, the consummation of the marriage, dream, and departure to Denmark occur roughly mid-way through the poem starting at lines 1200-1450.

Vulnerable females and potential rape was certainly not an uncommon motivation for Medieval romances in general, so it is not that *Havelok* operates as a total outlier from the genre (Meister 1991). In Arthurian romances, for instance, Gravdal notes five potential uses of sexual violence as narrative devices: a chivalric test or combat, an ethical test, a social marker (true nobility not being prone to rape), a test of a kingdom's strength, or as an aesthetic test (Gravdal 1991a, 44). A tour through Chretien de Troyes or later Malory depicts knights-errants who seek threats to overcome and display their prowess.

The English *Havelok* is the hyper violent and sexualized version of the genre, however, as it corresponds to four out of Gravdal's five narrative devices: rape becomes a lite motif as evinced by Goldeboru's beauty; the defense against potential rape to show Havelok's mettle; a marker of lower vs. upper classes; a test for the survival of the Kingdom of Denmark. The rape motif in *Havelok* transforms into full-fledged plot focus as the following thousand lines abound with fear for Goldeboru's safety.

Just as the dream sequence concludes with the couple's consummation, the poet reintroduces the threat of rape as if coitus begets coitus. The threat to Goldeboru pervades this entire section, even when the threat doesn't seem warranted at all, and seems to function entirely as a narrative strategy to propel action (McIntosh 1976).¹³

Unlike the French sources, the Middle English poem emphasizes the potential rape of Goldeboru for hundreds of lines. For instance, when Havelok first arrives at Ubbe's to ask permission to sell his "wares", he immediately fears for his wife's safety as Ubbe responds:

‘That thou lovest al-so thi lif-
And have thou of hire no drede;

Shal hire no man shame bede.
Bi the fey that I owe to the
Ther-of shal I meself borw be'
Havelok herde that he bad;
And, thow, was he ful sore drad
With him to ete, for his wif-
For him wore levere that his lif
Him wore reft than she in blame
Felle or lauthe ani shame (Shepherd 1995, 41).

The first encounter with Ubbe illustrates a fear for Goldeboru, but the English poet exhibits a monocular focus on the theme (McIntosh 1976).

A few lines later Havelok again reiterates his fears for his wife:

Havelok ne durste, thei he were adrad,
Nouth with-sitten that Ubbe bad;
His wif he dide with him lede.
Unto the heye curt he yede;
Roberd hire ledde (that was red-
That havede tholed for hire the ded
Or ani havede her misseyd
Or hand with ivele onne leyd (Shepherd 1995, 42).

Again, after pondering this problem of rape Ubbe sends the two with Bernard and an honor guard of sixty men because he reasons to himself:

Yf I late hem go
Thus-one foure, withuten mo-
So mote Ich brouke finger or to,
For this wimman bes mikel wo;
For hire shal men hire loverd slo.
He tok sone knithes ten,
And wel sixti other men
Wit gode bowes and with gleives,
And sende him unto the greyves (Shepherd 1995, 43).

Ubbe's attempts to allay Havelok's fears (as a good host) are well-founded concerns born out with the attempted gang rape of Goldeboru by the "sixty and ten" young ruffians.

All sources for the text include some form of threat of sexual violence. In Gaimar's version, Cuaran defends his wife against six young tuffs who are inspired by Argentille's beauty enough to carry her off.

The *Lai* also employs a section in which Argentille is carried off by six squires who lust after her body. Havelok, though, hyper focuses on the prurient and makes this into a central feature of the plot.

Rape and Medieval Law

In this, both French versions correspond to the exact nature of medieval rape law. Medieval ideas of rape or *raptus* included not only theft of maidenhead or forced intercourse, but it often meant the forcible abduction of the woman to another location so that forced intercourse could occur (Saunders 2001; Brown 2009; Carter 1985; Gravdal 1991a).¹⁴ *Raptus* could be sexual in nature, but it could also intimate the theft of another man's property as the woman's body was his to give away to whomever he wished (Saunders 2001).

Interestingly, the Middle English poem increased the number of ruffians from six to sixty and ten and only alludes to the possibility of *raptus* as abduction (i.e. abduction of property). The English version dwells on the prurient, salacious details of violation. Modeled on Lot in Sodom and Gomorra, men come to Bernard Brun's house looking for sexual satisfaction, only to be denied. Havelok steps up to the hall door with a huge pole, blocking the metaphorical entrance to the inner recesses. This passage, rich with sexual symbolism, allows Havelok to progress to his next stage of kingship on the nearly violated body of his wife (Carter 1985).¹⁵

The French versions of Havelok emphasize different elements other than the potential rape of Goldeboru. In Gaimar's account, Ubbe (Sigar) remembers the name Cuaran from years back and watched through the night to see if his suspicion was true of the miraculous flame issuing from Havelok's mouth. The following day, after summoning all the barons, Sigar makes Cuaran pass the final test of blowing the mythical horn that only the true king could sound. This Cuaran successfully sounds the horn and all the barons swear homage.

No rape involved there.

The *Lai* shows how Grim's son-in-law Kelloc, who was a merchant, fitted Cuaran and Argentille with proper clothes and told them to accompany Sigar Estalre, who would take them in because of Argentille's beauty. Again, six men attack Argentille, Cuaran defends her and they flee to the church. Like Gaimar, Cuaran is forced to sound a horn to show his patrimony.

The threat of violence to a woman to motivate a man to martial prowess is not new theme in medieval romance (Davenport 2004). In Chretien's *Erec and Enid*, Erec even returns from the dead when he hears that the count wishes to take his wife by force. Yet the sheer amount of energy spent by the poet, Ubbe, Havelok and Bernard seems overzealous just to protect the wife of a visiting merchant. But when viewed as a national issue, the potential rape of Goldeboru becomes a symbol for the breakdown in the feudal economy.

From the beginning of the poem, Athelwold is describes as the ideal king who protected both land and its inhabitants. And the poem emphasizes Athewold's good kingship by alluding in the first part of the poem to his punishment of those who would harm widows or maidens:

And wo dide widuen wrong,
Were he nevre knicth so strong
That he ne made him sone kesten
And in feteres ful faste festen.
And wo-so dide maydne shame
Of hire bodi, or brouth in blame
(Bute it were bi hire wille),
He made him sone of limes spille (Shepherd 1995, 5).

This passage echoes and even *improves upon* the legal formulation of rape present in the courts of law in the mid-thirteenth century as posited by famed legal theorist Henry de Bracton (Scott 1992).¹⁶

Marshall Carter summarizes Bracton's views: "Rather than punish the rapist of every woman with death or dismemberment, Bracton believed that the rapist of a virgin should be punished more severely than the rapist of a non-virgin. For the rapist of a virgin, Bracton still believed that loss of life or member or blinding was the appropriate punishment because '...to defile a virgin and to lie with one defiled are different deeds'" (Carter 1985, 38). Athelwold, unlike legal theorist Bracton, also protects widows under the same rape laws, which were notorious for not protecting widows at all. Athelwold's punishment for rapists ("He made him sone of limes spille") echoes the traditional punishment of castration for perpetrators of rape.

The Middle English poet certainly understood the laws involving rape or raptus, and he emphasizes the threat to Goldeboru to juxtapose the ideal kingship and purveyor of law as embodied in Athelwold to the breakdown in law and order within Denmark. National power requires an Ubbe figure to protect one lone woman, echoing in visceral form the protection that the idealized King Athelwold used to offer. Indeed, Goldeboru's raptus becomes a site at which Havelok, as the next ideal king, can step in and rectify right.

Sexual Violence is Narrative

The Middle English *Havelok* over-emphasizes the danger to Goldeboru; she becomes a lodestone for all potential rapists who perhaps could have controlled themselves, but who can't resist. Like Gravidal's assertion that beauty often motivates incidents of rape in Medieval romances, especially in the Arthurian cycles, Goldeboru's beauty here ushers in an entire section devoted to her defense. Ubbe summons up seventy armed men to defend this "merchant" Havelok and his wife, which seems rather draining on a noble's resources.

Of course, potential rape equates to martial deeds, and Havelok's deeds are retold with three versions of the same battle: a first account of the battle proper from a third person perspective; Bernard's account to Ubbe; Ubbe's redaction and summary of the brave actions: "That of tho sixti men and on/ Ne wente ther away lives non" (Shepherd 1995, 48). Even when Bernard offers another theory for the attack, namely robbery, Ubbe brings the discussion back to the theme of rape with his assurance that:

A rof shal hile us bothe o nith,
That none of mine, clerk ne knith,
Ne sholen thi wif no shame bede—
No more than min, so God me rede (Shepherd 1995, 52).

Clearly, the threat of forced coitus creates the battle to begin with and allows Ubbe to think of knightening Havelok for his bravery.

The Middle English poet takes every opportunity to bring the story (and the narrative tension) back to the threat to Goldeboru's porous body, which becomes the central organizing principle for the entire text. For instance, after the attack on his holding, Ubbe knights Havelok, participates in the rite of vassalage by the barons in Denmark, and vows support for Havelok against Godard and Godrich (Purdon 1993). But at the moment of greatest resolution in Havelok's restoration, the poet emphasizes Goldeboru's porous body (and alludes to all the threats to it):

Than the Englishe men that sawe—
That thei wisten, heye and lawe,
That Goldeboru, that was so fayr,
Was of Engeland rith eyr,
And that the King hire havede wedded,
And haveden ben samen bedded—
He comen alle to crie merci,
Unto the King, at one cri (Shepherd 1995, 68) (italics mine)

Havelok's kingship is intimately connected to Goldeboru's body—the nobles of England willingly reward Havelok after they have seen that he married Goldeboru and that he “haveden bens amen bedded”.

After Havelok orders Godrich to the stake (all the barons of the land advised him in this communal decision), he denies Godrich's sons of their patrimony. Havelok completes the feudal obligation as newly elected king by receiving homage, fealty and finally distributing fiefs. At this point, he gives his “sisters” (Grim's daughters) in marriage (“Hire (that was ful swete in bedde)” (Shepherd 1995, 73) to one noble and the cook who fostered him earlier, emphasizing her sexual promise while completing the circle of dispossession to possession of his realm, ennobling the peasants who assisted in his reclamation of the throne. Justice is served on the backs of women.

The poem concludes with a forty day feast and an intense focus on the number of children produced, a cornucopia of abundance both in terms of symbolic feast but also for the regal duty of procuring offspring (Krueger 2000; Liuzza 1994).¹⁷ The earl that married Grim's daughter, Gunnild, has some success in fostering progeny (“And gaten mani children samen,/ And liveden ay in blisse and game,” but is no match for Havelok's success as a father and king:

He geten children hem bitwene
Sones and douthres rith fivetene,
Hwar-of the sones were kinges alle-
SO wolde God it sholde bifalle-
And the douhtres alle quenes;
Him stondes wel that god child strenes (Shepherd 1995, 73).

Havelok and Goldeboru have fifteen sons and daughters, which nearly mirrors the fourteen children that Edward I had between 1261 and 1284, the exact time span for the composition of the poem and a singular parallel to his reign. This also echoes the tremendous importance placed on the trope of transition and the procuring of heirs (Baswell and Krueger 2000; Staines 1976).

The English version of *Havelok* takes the courtly themes of Arthurian medieval romance and lays them bare, stripping them down to their sexualized origins with the intense narrative focus on the female body and the threats to it. From Havelok's pathos-inducing, murdered sisters, to Goldeboru's continuous threat of rape, to the comments on her beauty, to her porous body legitimized through marriage and to her eventually fecundity, to the ritual giving away of Grim's daughters, the poem engages in contemporary grievances of wardship, marriage, property and rape law, feudalism, and marriage.

It focuses on the often vulnerable and fecund bodies of women to legitimize power and restore social order. *Havelok the Dane* surpasses the Arthurian romances of the period in its use of the female body as narrative apparatus that engages with medieval understandings of rape and raptus. Through the salacious use of titillating sexual violence, the poet calls attention to the central role women play in the romance tradition, especially as objects of desire. In *Havelok*, the women not only propel narrative; they are, in some sense, the narrative. This reading of the poem invites a reexamination of the Arthurian romance tradition and its connection to courtly power through the lens of commodification of the female body not only as motivating factors for action but as central to the quest for masculinity, kingship, and the restoration of social order (Tether et al. 2017).

Endnotes:

1. Purdon argues that the poet uses the traditional three step process of vassalage (homage, fealty, and fief) to further complicate the presentation of kingship within the text. Purdon investigates how both Godard and Godrich are made to fulfill only one part of vassalage, homage, whereas the poet portrays Havelok as garnering all traditional rights of the king once he is crowned.
2. There was a certain amount of anxiety in the thirteenth-century surrounding wardships and inheritance. See *Documents of the Baronial Movement of Reform and Rebellion 1258-1267*, which contains references to repeated complaints by the barons over wardships falling into the king's hands: "In the same way, concerning Wardships and escheats of the nobles falling into the lord king's hand, the goods of which the keepers of these properties completely dilapidate, selling plantations, destroying parks and fishponds, permitting houses, park fences, ditches and other things which could and should be kept in order by small repairs, to go to utter rack and ruin; even marrying such noble persons to obscure and unknown persons, they [the keepers] often disparage them against the terms of the charter" (Treharne & Sanders, 1973, p. 271).

3. Aertsen ties the symbolism of this passage to Havelok's denying his identity and into the wheel of fortune motif, this being the lowest part of the wheel for Havelok (p. 44). See also Hanning, Robert W. "Havelok the Dane: Structure, Symbols, Meaning." *Studies in Philology* LXIV:4 (1967): 586-605. Hanning states that "The loss of a social identity implicit in Havelok's surrender of sovereignty determines and prefigures his subsequent, explicit loss of personal identity in leaving Denmark to grow up as a fisherman's son in England" (p. 592).
4. Smithers summarizes both Gaimar and the *Lai* in his edition of *Havelok. L'Estoire* begins with the story of Argentille and then turns to Cuaran who is already established in Edelsi's service. Edelsi here is Argentille's (Goldeboru) regent who forces the misalliance. The *Lai* briefly alludes to Cuaran's childhood flight and then focuses on the travel to Lincoln with Grim's two sons.
5. Many sources for primogeniture exist, but Waugh explains how "sisters and younger brothers, theoretically left out of the inheritance under primogeniture, in fact, often received a pre-mortem share of the inheritance in the form of gifts from the holder of the estate.... This fission intensified whenever women inherited because, from the late twelfth century onward, estates were divided equally among female heirs (1988, p. 16).
6. Kantorowicz asserts that such symbols became overdetermined, as is the case with Havelok's multiple symbols that recur.
7. Levine argues that if Havelok was written "for an audience for whom power was both a possibility and a habit, for whom John of Salisbury's ideas had some appeal, and for whom violence was not confined to the world of stylized art but was a fact of everyday historical reality, Havelok lays the responsibility for horror where it belonged in the thirteenth century, with the aristocrats" (p. 104). Levine represents the poem as a critique of aristocrats, but not by peasants.
8. Ishkanian has commented on Havelok as employee: "In short, Havelok is presented as an ideal worker. Yet we must acknowledge that he is an ideal worker only from the point of view of an employer. He is extremely competitive with other workers, works for nothing, gladly works to the point of exhaustion, and never complains but always smiles. None of this behavior could be considered either realistic or admirable by an audience of ordinary workers, though it would suit the taste of their urban employers or manorial supervisors" (p. 297).
9. Staines writes of the fisherman's daughter Kelloc in Gaimar: "When Kelloc does disclose the truth [of Havelok's parentage which he did not know], she advises him to return to Denmark: in addition, she prepares his provisions and arranges all the details for the journey. As he assumes the course of destiny his royal parentage demands of him, Havelok remains an almost wholly passive individual" (p. 604).
10. Gravdal explores the theme of misalliance in French romances during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Gravdal sees misalliance as a continuation of the struggle between affluent peasant and impoverished lord. Misalliance, or disparagement as it was actually termed in the thirteenth-century, seems to have been a problem, at least nuisance enough to define the term and make a law concerning it. Also see Scott Waugh's "The Lordship of England". "The first time that disparagement was explicitly defined, in the Statute of Merton (1236), it was taken to mean marriage to a villein or burgess. The sanctions of the statute were directed at mesne lords; it did not deal with the king's rights. For greater tenants-in-chief, such a marriage was unthinkable, and no example has been found. At their level of society, the issue of compatible status remained paramount throughout the thirteenth century" (Waugh 81).
11. Grim's speech reads: "Loverd, have merci/ Of me, and Leve that is me bi!/ Loverd, we aren bothe thine-/ Thine cherles, thine hine./ Lowerd, we sholen the wel fede/ Til that thu cone riden on stede,/ Til that thu cone ful wel bere/ Helm on heved, sheld and spere;/ He ne shal never wite, sikerlike-/ Godard-that fule swikel/ Thoru other man, loverd, than thoru the/ Sal I nevere freman be; Thous shalt me, loverd, fre maken,/ For I shal yemen the and waken-Thoru the wile I freedom have!" (Shepherd, 1995, p. 27).
12. Delany Ishkanian comments on Grim's chattel that the only way for Havelok to free Grim is through contractual negotiations, i.e. the law of a year and a day. "This privilege," according to Sheila Ishkanian,

- “included in many borough charters, provided that any person who lived peacefully in the borough in his own house for the stipulated period, would automatically become free. What Grim seems to anticipate, then is that his path to freedom lies through the borough privileges which were the essence of the alliance between king and bourgeoisie” (Ishkanian, 1974, p. 296). Grim may anticipate freedom, but Ishkanian does not respond to Grim’s sons’ unmitigated pledge to Havelok.
13. McIntosh also discusses the significant differences among the various versions of the poem.
 14. Kathryn Gravdal concludes that raptus occurred in the medieval sense when these four stipulations had been met: “there has been unlawful coitus; the woman has been abducted from the house of her father; the rape was accomplished by violence; and a marriage agreement has not been negotiated previously between the victim and the ravisher. Gratian’s new specification that the victim was protected only when abducted from the house of her father underscored the patriarchal nature of this medieval law: it was concerned primarily with the protection of the father’s rights, not those of his daughter” (pp. 8-9). John Carter concludes that “In the 145 cases investigated for this study, only one, from the Hertfordshire Eyre of 1287, suggests that coitus had to be completed by orgasm before the illegal sexual act was declared rape by the Eyre justices and the jury” (p. 37). Carter finds differing definitions by thirteenth and fourteenth century legal theorists arguing whether penetration, coitus, or abduction all must occur for the rape to be prosecuted.
 15. In Gaimar’s account Cuaran takes up a battle ax to defend Argentille’s honor, killed three and wounded the others. They then flee to a local church where Cuaran then begins throwing stones down on Ubbe’s (Sigar’s) men. The reference here to a battle ax, which explains why the town seal of Lincoln should show Havelok with a battle ax and stones one side, varies from the peasant weapon which Havelok employs in the ME version. The presence of the stones in the ME poem may also be explained with reference to his throwing stones in Gaimar.
 16. Scott claims that “the poet channels the power of the spoken word to effective, purposeful uses in the spheres of the law and court. Language or speech in Havelok is represented consistently as performance... Spoken language becomes a powerful tool of delegation, debate, and judgment, a means to mediate between correct and incorrect behavior, and a force more pervasive and valuable than heroic prowess or brute strength” (p. 141). Scott finds a variety of sociolects within the poem’s oral discourse.
 17. For discussions on food symbology, see Robert Hanning, who finds that the six separate occasions for feasts have symbolic value and chart the progress of Havelok in his reclamation of the throne: “Each feast is more important than the one before, though all come at crucial moments in the story, and signal important stages in Havelok’s development” (p. 594). Likewise, Liuzza focuses on the realism of the story and sees food, including the descriptions of all the fish, as contributing to bourgeois realism (Liuzza, 1994).

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