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Generational Tension in Middle English Lais

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GENERATIONAL TENSION IN
MIDDLE ENGLISH LAIS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Amy Napier
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved, August 1992

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John Conlee

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to study the patterns of generational tension which drive the characters in three Middle English lais, Lai Le Freine, Sir Gowther, and Emare. In each of the three lais, strikingly similar motifs concerning the interaction of various generations led to the question of why parents and children can not get along without first undergoing extreme and sometimes violent reassessments of their respective positions within the familial, social, and political hierarchies.

In isolating this tendency toward generational tension, such power structures as the medieval church and government began to emerge as collusive forces in this struggle between the generations. Also significant was the consistent tendency to attempt to manipulate and contain generational tension once it did emerge by attempting to confine it within some sort of private space, out of the public eye.

The analysis of this public-private interplay, in conjunction with the tension that erupts as families realign and transfer the power center from generation to generation comprises the bulk of this thesis.
GENERATIONAL TENSION
IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LAIS
In the Middle English lais of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the family, with all its squabbling, jealousy, cruelty, love, and ultimate cohesion, is the central unit of the political and social matrix in which the characters operate. Utilizing such a "family-based pattern," complicated by various "disruptive powers" (Knight 110), these lais invite an exploration of the underlying assumptions and implicit desires which drive the characters to their sometimes inscrutable actions. In most cases, this desire which motivates the characters is a longing for familial, social, and political power, and space within which to wield that power. As each character attempts to play out his or her own desires within this family unit, clashes become inevitable, as one family member attempts to thwart the desire of all others. It is this thwarting of the desire for familial power which provides the tension that drives the lais. In this struggle for power within the family, these Middle English lais tend to focus on stress aroused across generations, as the empowered older generation attempts to cling to its familial power in the face of a rising, potentially powerful younger generation. Each generation wishes to occupy a position of leadership in the family, and the events which result as this conflict plays itself out characterize many of the lais. This "generational tension," aroused as the older generation realizes the power
of its youthful offspring to affect its well-being, becomes a driving force in the quest for identity and power within the family.

As this generational tension emerges in the lais, the typical response of the older generation is an attempt to contain the rising power of the potentially usurping younger generation by banishing, enclosing, or disowning these children in acts of familial denial which result in patterns of separation and integration, expulsion and reunion. In attempting to contain the power of the children, parents try to erect fragile boundaries around the power of the child which will impede his power to disrupt the family; however, the children inevitably rebel against these boundaries, so that the child's efforts to escape containment provide the impetus for much of the action of the lais. Indeed, the majority of these lais to revolve around family units disrupted by tension and stress within the families, or by external agents which provoke such tension and stress. In the case of three of these Middle English lais, Lai Le Freine, Sir Gowther, and Emare, this disruptive force is the generational tension which drives mothers to disown daughters, sons to drive parents to death, and fathers to cast off children, all in an attempt either to retain or attain a position of power within the family, and, by extension, to carve out a socially acceptable space in medieval society. In each of these lais, it is generational tension which drives the characters to the
desperate attempts to manipulate, expand, contain, and constrain their environment and that of their parents and children. This interplay of generational tension and public-private containment and manipulation, which operate in a shifting matrix of cause and effect, serves as the driving force in these poems.

In the Middle English *Lai Le Freine*, the "triangle formed by the father, mother, and children, the fundamental unit of the Middle Ages" and its disruption and restoration, are the central factors which characterize the poem (Cholokian 182). The generational tension which drives the lai begins when the birth of twins prevents their mother from satisfactorily preserving her public reputation in the eyes of the community and produces her attempts to reorganize her private space in such a way that her public appearance will remain intact. The scramble to manipulate public and private spaces, the typical response to generational tension in these lais, defines the action of the poem much as it does in its original French version. In attempting to keep familial trouble private, she means to confine it to the familial realm; once it becomes public, i.e. public knowledge, her public image will have been irrevocably altered by these twin babies and the stigma she has attached to them.

The Middle English version of *Lai Le Freine*, dated around the middle of the thirteenth to the middle of the fourteenth century, while retaining the storyline and much of the syntax
of the original Marie de France poem, is much more than a mere translation (Donovan 127, 132). The original French poem centered around folktale motifs, embroidered with what Donovan calls "an effective expression of ideal conduct," which turns the tale into a model of the ideals of courtly love (122-3). While "the rise of an English audience contributed to the change of emphasis" which moved the focus away from a love story to more of an adventure tale with strong moralistic overtones (Donovan 123, Mehl 41), the central focus of the tale remains constant from the French to the English version. Attempts to manipulate and contain a usurping younger generation and the resulting escape and eventual reconciliation of the ascendance of this dangerous youthful generation with the reluctant surrender of the older generation dominate the action of Lay le Freine.

After a twenty-eight line introduction, in which the anonymous author links his tale to "a cas [which] bifel in Breteyne" (23), which he now plans "in Ingliche for to tellen" (25), thus linking himself to the "hold time" (13) and establishing authority for himself in an age obsessed with "veneration of the past in general" (Minnis 9), the poem moves on to the tale of childbirth, shame, expulsion, concealment, and eventual recognition and reunion. Even in the introduction, the concern with preexisting authority is a preoccupation of the narrative. The potential for tension is immediately made present, when one family is presented with
the all-important opportunity to continue the bloodline and family name, while another remains childless. The action begins by introducing "tvay knightes" (29), rich, noble men, roughly equal in holdings and status, except for one major disparity: one of the knights' wives is pregnant. This potential disparity between the knights, centering around the presence of an heir for one family while the other remains childless, converts these knights' previously equitable, horizontal relationship into a hierarchized, vertically measured interaction, in which one knight is now raised above the other in the eyes of society. Thus, as the opening scenario of the lai unfolds, it is one of disturbed equilibrium, upset by the appearance of a younger generation. In the opening lines of the lai, the stage is set for generational tension to begin to play upon the insecurities of the characters, which it quickly does. Yet, typically, an initial effort is made to contain this burgeoning familial tension by incorporating the childless couple into roles analogous with parenthood; in asking the childless knight to serve as "gossibbe" (42), or godparent, the knight attempts to ward off this tension and jealousy sparked by the appearance of a new generation of competition by, in effect, sharing paternity with the childless knight.

But despite this effort at containment, the birth of one knight's child, which should have sparked joy through the land, actually ignites twice the generational tension
expected, and complicates the processes of inheritance and primogeniture, because the lady gives birth to twins. When it is made public that the lady had given birth to twin sons, the "proude and envieous" (70) childless wife, in her jealousy, spreads the malicious rumor that, in order to have had twins, the new mother would have had to sleep with two men (71-2); her rumor not only casts aspersions upon the morality of the new mother, it attempts to sever the link between the generations by introducing a fictitious adulterous lover to the scenario and putting the paternity of the baby in question. Whereas the generational tension surrounding the birth of one son could apparently have been absorbed by allowing the childless couple to serve as godparents, the birth of twin sons seems to exceed the normative powers of the jealous childless lady. And, since generational tension generally results in some attempt to manipulate the public-private interplay at work in the Middle English lais, in this first manifestation of generational tension, the childless lady, in her envy and rage, attacks the public portrayal of the new mother, slandering her reputation, the public picture of the woman, or, in effect, reshaping her public function by attacking the private nature of conception. The slanderous woman's husband responds to this defamation in anger, "rebouking his levedy" (75), and "curssing her alle yfere" (77-8). Since the trouble began with the generational tension sparked by the birth of twin sons to a neighbor, it is hardly
surprising that the curse the knight places upon his wife has
to do with her part in producing a new generation in his own
family. The curse, "That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide,/ A wers aventour hir schuld bitide" (81-2), far from
solving the burgeoning problem of generational tension in the
community, simply extends the problem onto any offspring his
wife might bear. In an extreme manifestation of generational
tension, the knight basically curses his own hypothetical
offspring, a sure sign that deeper generational anxiety will
emerge, along with the characters' increasingly violent and
extreme attempts to contain it.

Almost immediately it does indeed emerge, as the
slandering wife gives birth to twin daughters (87), thus
finding herself on the wrong side of the public-private
dichotomy she herself had erected in ruining the other woman's
public reputation, thus "assuming both the roles of
accuser...and victim" (Wittig 129). Her lament when she
realizes that her husband's curse has been manifested on her
culminates in the ultimate statement of generational tension,
one which is common to each of the three lais discussed--the
wish never to have been born. As the woman mourns,
"Allas...that Y was born!" (95), she has temporarily been
conquered by the younger generation, represented by her twin
daughters; she believes, albeit temporarily, that the two
generations' existence is mutually exclusive, that the arrival
of a new generation precludes her own existence, and that it
would have been preferable never to have lived at all in the face of the disaster which the young twins bring upon her. Almost immediately, however, she overcomes her despair and begins to make plans to contain the generational anxiety which momentarily overwhelmed her. After reviewing several options, decides upon the inverse of her previous desire never to have lived herself—she decides "sle her childe and do penaunce" (115) in order to preserve her reputation, thus keeping the potentially devastating second daughter from ever entering the public realm by confining the whole incident to the private realm.

But, as is generally the case in these lais, a child is a public figure who cannot be wholly contained in a private space and who will respond to the ever-tightening constriction of its private space with some sort of escape, some slippage into the public world. This is, in fact, exactly what happens in this lai, as Freine, doomed to the ultimate private space of the grave, slips from this constriction into the semi-private world of the abbey. When the midwife refuses to carry out the mother's plan to murder one of the children there in the birth room, another of the woman's servants offers a different plan, one which would still make an attempt at containing the child within a private realm, and eliminating the tension spawned by its birth, but would move the child one step closer to the public world. By offering to place the child anonymously in a convent (130), the maid recognizes the
impracticality and danger of the first and ultimate attempt to contain the child—murder—and slides the child into a position still private, but far more public than a coffin. Thus, the attempt to confine the baby, the source of generational tension, to the ultimate private realm, by concealing her birth in a secret murder, fails, and the child is ejected into a world far closer to the public world from which her mother tried so desperately to conceal her.

In fact, before being absorbed into the convent near which she is abandoned, the baby is temporarily placed in a position of dangerously slight concealment, quite close indeed to exposure much more public than her mother and maid had intended. With the baby out in the open, laying in a tree with the ring and blanket, the only tokens of paternity which her mother allows her, she has temporarily slid into a public space which could have proven disastrous to the mother's plan and reputation. In these lais, however, the characters caught in the grip of generational tension seldom escape the containing power of the church, the most powerful agent of social control of the age, and, accordingly, the baby is found by the porter of the nunnery, who, Janus-like, monitors the threshold between public and private worlds, and takes the child to the abbess. The abbess' decides to welcome the foundling into both the universal family of God and into her own personal kinship network, claiming that the baby "is welcom to God and to me./ Ichill it help as Y can,/ And sigge
it is my kinswoman" (222-4). She thus temporarily defuses the generational tension which had so recently built to such a murderous pitch: with the baby safely contained within convent walls, her interaction with the public world, after the brief time in the tree, completely restricted, and her familial origins concealed beneath the abbess' claim of kinship, the church has effectively served as a vehicle of social control strong enough to cool and contain the generational tension that had driven the first two hundred lines of the lai.

It is, in fact, indicative of the lai's explicit concern with generational tension that during Le Freine's twelve years of successful containment, and thus the twelve year abeyance of generational tension, there is no narrative; the lai resumes only when Freine has passed childhood and "couthe ought of manhed" (241), i.e., become curious about her parentage. The narrator has no interest in periods of Freine's life devoid of tension and complication, and since any tension in Freine's life is born of generational anxiety, the tale itself, and the narrative choices that construct it, are ruled by Freine's ability to act within a tense and delicate balance of generational tension and its containment. It is when her curiosity concerning her "fader or moder, soster or brother" (244) erupts that the balance of generational tension and its containment begins to dissolve, for it is then that the nun, who had posed as her kinswoman
for these twelve years of containment, allows the walls of ignorance which had encircled Freine as surely as the convent walls to crumble. Upon the nun's revelation of Freine's discovery in the ash tree and of the tokens of her familial origins left with her by her mother, Freine takes the first step toward confronting the family whose intense anxiety surrounding her birth ejected her into the walled nunnery which had housed her during her childhood. With these familial links, slender as they may be, established, Freine's period of containment is essentially concluded, and she begins to move into the world from which her mother's intense generational tension had excluded her at birth. The revelation of these tokens, the cloth and the ring, concealed for so long, finally enter a more public realm, inasmuch as Freine's knowledge of them makes them public. This is the first link in a chain of events which will eventually connect Freine with the family she lost so long ago.

As this information surrounding Freine's parentage and origins is revealed, her containment within the semi-private realm of the abbey begins to slip; as tokens of her familial origins are made available to her, the inevitable second phase of generational tension begins, in which the tension slips into the public realm, where it either finally destroys those in whom it was engendered or is resolved. In either case, it is this slippage into the public realm which foils any attempt to contain generational tension and leads to the backlash
which either reunites the embattled generations or destroys the elder, leaving the field open for the pattern to repeat itself as the younger generation assumes the role left vacant by its vanquished elders.

In the case of *Lai Le Freine*, the movement is toward reconciliation between the generations, a reconciliation which is prompted as Freine moves further and further into the public realm. This movement toward the public eye will eventually and inexorably bring Freine face to face with her family, forcing resolution of some sort. In fact, it is Freine's fame, originating in her beauty, circulated by word of mouth through the public realm, which brings her into direct contact with the outside world. Sir Guroun, the "riche knight.../ Proud, and yong, and jolive" (252-3), upon hearing "praise of that maiden fre" (258), decides to see her for himself, and during this interview, recognizes "hir gentrise" (268), or gentility, at which point he "comenced to love hir anon right" (270). This love drives him to desire her as his "leman" (272), or mistress. Though he recognizes her innate gentility, her apparent lack of legitimate familial origin drives this powerful knight to want her not as his wife, but as his mistress, a position outside the social and moral order dictated by the church, which has dominated Freine's life up to this point. Thus the generational tension which cut her off from her family and abandoned her at the abbey also cuts Freine off from legitimate, legal union with the knight, who
will apparently reserve his choice of wife for a woman who brings with her the legitimization provided by acceptable ancestry. In short, generational tension leaves Freine outside the socially mandated patterns of marriage, reproduction, and inheritance.

Accordingly, Guroun sets about luring Freine away from the social control represented by the abbey and into his arms as his mistress. He accounts for his frequent visits to the abbey by telling the abbess that he wishes to become a brother of the order (thus incorporating himself into the same family which has absorbed Freine), and offers "londes and rentes" (282) to earn him this position. Eventually, he flatters Freine into running away from the abbey and her "aunt," urging her to "go with me,/ For Ich am riche, of swithe pouwere;/ The finde bet than thou hast here" (295-6). This invitation into a realm more public than the abbey, yet still confined to the realm of private desire without accompanying social sanction, is at least a partial incorporation into the social structure from which generational tension had excluded Freine, and entices her to steal away with him, carrying nothing with her except "hir pel and her ring" (300). As she escapes the containment dictated by generational tension, she symbolically announces her movement toward confrontation with her family by carrying with her the tokens of her parentage while at the same time completely abandoning the false identity offered her at the abbey. Her move to the knight is simultaneously a
movement toward the public world and toward the familial bonds which generational tension had severed.

Though it seems during the seven line interlude of intimate bliss, during which Guroun and Freine live happily together as lovers, that Freine may have carved out a familial space for herself and that any generational tension may be contained in her realignment of family ties, generational anxiety rears its head once again, this time to drive the couple apart. After this brief lull in the tension which pushes the lai,

"His [Guroun's] knightes com and to him speke,  
And holy chirche comandeth eke,  
Sum lorde's daughter for to take,  
And his leman al forsake;  
And seyd him wer wel more feir  
In wedlok to geten him an air" (310-16).

In short, Guroun is ordered by the church, the mechanism of social control, and by the knights who are his underlings to forsake his mistress in order to be able to father legitimate heirs within the socially sanctioned institution of marriage. It is the church's and state's anxiety over Guroun's inability to produce legitimate offspring and continue the bloodline into another generation which prompts them to urge Guroun to leave Freine, who is herself reduced to the role of an unwelcome obstacle, one which sparks generational tension by standing in the way of the marriage which would allow
legitimate inheritance, knighthood, government, and social stability to run its course.

Thus, once again, albeit from a different angle, Freine is the victim of the generational tension which forced her from her family at birth. For a second time, generational tension ejects Freine from her family, first from her family of origin, and then from the illegitimate "family" consisting of herself and Guroun. The anxiety Freine caused her mother, who had to banish Freine from the family into the private realm of the abbey in order to save her public reputation, is essentially duplicated in the anxiety she causes the community as she threatens the familial structure of the lord of the realm. In both cases, this generational tension drives Freine from the family structure to a much lower step on the social hierarchy. Ironically, it is this very act of banishment which eventually brings Freine face to face with both her families and ultimately reincorporates her into both. As the generational tension comes to a head in Lai Le Freine, a reversal of some sort becomes inevitable; with Freine's containment having twice failed, the only option remaining is her integration into the public realm, or a family structure, the only other solution to the generational anxiety that drove the lai thus far. Attempts conducted within the private realm to contain Freine and defuse generational tension fail, so now the struggle must move into the public realm if the tension is to be absorbed and the lai satisfactorily concluded.
When the knight Guroun chooses a socially acceptable wife, he chooses Freine's twin sister Codre, who brings with her to the wedding festivities her (and of course Freine's) father and mother, and brings the family into the home in which Freine now labors as a servant. A confrontation is inevitable, as the whole family group is moved into the public arena, and in fact into one house. And, indeed, when Freine's mother sees her, though she does not yet recognize her, she "marked her simple chere,/ And gan to love her, wonder dere./ Scarce could sche feel more pine or reuth/ War it hir own childe in sooth" (295-8). Thus, even before any official recognition or reunion occurs, Freine is incorporated into the spot reserved for a child in the mother's psyche, and a psychological reunion has begun. Apparently, the mother's generational tension has dissolved to a point after all these years that she is psychologically ready to readmit into her private world a daughter who has escaped into the public world, albeit with her identity concealed.

It is at this point that the manuscript breaks off, leaving the tension forever unresolved, although modern scholars have reconstructed the last lines of the lai according to the model of the Marie de France version, with which the Middle English largely accords. In Marie's version and also in the reconstructed Middle English version, after Guroun and Codre are married, Freine goes to prepare the marriage chamber; she spreads upon the marriage bed the cloth
which was left with her when she was abandoned at the abbey, in an apparently innocent act of generosity. Considering the psychological implications, however, her final, desperate, perhaps unconscious, attempt to carve out a niche for herself in society becomes an eleventh hour assertion of all that she knows of her identity, which is contained in the blanket, and which she had apparently kept secret from Guroun. Paradoxically, her last act of Christian charity in giving up the man she loves and in fact decorating the marriage bed with the only token of her identity that she possesses is the act that wins back all that she had lost--family, identity, and her lover. When all seems lost for a second time for Freine, she blocks the marriage bed with a token of her identity, her generational roots, and this time she is able to save herself from continued, anonymous confinement in the private realm. Upon seeing the cloth laid on the bed, Freine's mother recognizes it and questions Freine, who tells her all she knows of her connection with her family, which is the tale the nun told her of how she was found in the ash tree wrapped in the blanket. At this point "was the levedi astonied shore:/ 'Fair child! My daughter! Y the bore!'") (385-7). Freine's assertion of her identity saved her from the anonymity of confinement in the private realm, and brings her into the public realm of acceptance by and incorporation into her family of birth. Since generational tension could never be contained in this lai, it is overcome in the only other way
possible, by reabsorbing the child, now a woman, into a family structure, where at least generational tension can be more successfully and productively channelled into raising offspring.

Upon her incorporation into her family, Freine gains an identity which makes her a worthy wife for the knight Guroun, who accordingly dissolves his marriage to her sister and marries Freine, leaving Codre to marry another "gentle knight of that country" (406). Freine successfully blocked Guroun's marriage to her sister, incorporated herself back into the family which banished her at birth, and, as the lai closes, finally begins to enjoy the benefits due to one who exists within the socially sanctioned world of family, identity, and legitimacy, and from this viewpoint the lai has a happy ending. Hanging over the lai, however, is the certainty that the tension which banished Freine initially, and was nearly duplicated in her impending banishment from Guroun's side, has not been resolved, merely absorbed, overcome. There is no certainty that this pattern could not repeat itself again and again. In this, the lai differs from the Marie de France version, in that it is more of a moral tale of the rewards of patient suffering than the predominantly secular, courtly French version attempted to be. Yet in both versions, it is the generational tension sparked by the birth of a child and by the necessity for legitimate lines of inheritance which motivates the characters and drives the action of the lai.
This is not to indicate, however, that once an heir is conceived and bloodlines perpetuated, generational tension is precluded; the generational tension which tormented the mother in *Lai Le Freine* just as frequently cuts in the other direction, leaving a child in an intense state of anxiety concerning his own parentage. In *Sir Gowther*, for example, it is a child's knowledge of his own "irregular birth" (Wittig 120) and his resultant "abject misery when his origin is made known to him" (Kane 32) which provide the tension which drives this lai. The first twenty-four lines of the poem succinctly outline the tension which will drive the lai, namely that of a father, albeit a demonic one, attempting to obtain a vicarious existence through a son begotten upon an unwitting mother, and the grief this son will cause his mother. In short, it is a tale of the devastation wreaked by a son upon his family as he attempts to separate himself from an unfortunate disaster of interrupted paternity, in which Satan stole the rightful place of a legitimate father in producing the heir. Somewhat unlike *Lai Le Freine*, in which it is the birth of a child which causes tension and disruption in the parent's life, *Sir Gowther* tells a tale not only of a son who terrorizes, maims, and eventually kills at least one of his parents, but also of this same son tormented and driven by the "hideous inheritance of his paternity" (Kane 32). The generational tension in *Sir Gowther* centers around a son's extreme attempts to locate an identity for himself independent
of both his true diabolical father and his human step-father. Also somewhat unlike Lai Le Freine is the handling of public and private spaces as this crisis of identity is negotiated; given Gowther's extremely public and powerful position in the social hierarchy, the greatest part of his crisis tends to be vented and resolved in the public realm, under the public eye, with very little action confined to any sort of private, cloistered space.

The lai opens with a description of the usurping power of Satan in the reproductive process of humans, a power which ominously disrupts the true bloodline whose smooth continuance is of such crucial importance to the smooth flow of medieval literature. With Satan's power "For to dele with ladies free/In likness of here fere" (8-9), i.e. to make love to women while disguised as their husbands, comes the power to usurp the position of the natural father in the human family. This usurpation excludes the father from the childbearing process and tips the scales of familial power dangerously toward the youthful offspring of this illicit and deceitful union. With the father completely shut out of the reproductive process and the child carrying with him the superhuman powers shared by Satanic offspring, among which the lai numbers the great magician Merlin (10), the delicate balance of generational tranquility is irrevocably upset. Generational tension is bound to result, and it becomes apparent in the next stanza that it does indeed erupt, as the quintessential story of "how
a child was gete,/ And in what sorow his moder he sett/ With his workis so wild" (22-24) unfolds, and a basic pattern of mutual grief and tension between parents and son emerges, and generational anxiety begins its reign over the characters' lives and actions.

Immediately following this introduction, which reveals the theme of generational strife that dominates the lai, is symbolic evidence of the underlying tension which has haunted the marriage from its earliest moments, hinting at the social instability that a discontinuation of the royal bloodline will spark. The day after the wedding of Gowther's ostensible father, the "duk of Ostrych" (31), who receives no further description beyond his political and social status, and the "lady nobil and riche.../ That couteis damysell" (32-6), there is a tournament celebrating this union. These games, celebrated "for the ladys sake" (45), are described not in terms of any sense of community or fellowship sparked by this wedding celebration, but in the somewhat ominous terms of the duke "baring down many dowghti men;/ Here shildes gan he crake" (47-8). Thus, even in its earliest social manifestation, that of a celebratory tournament, the marriage, the potential vehicle of successful procreation and continuation of this duke's familial line, is marked by violence and ritualized mock-warfare. While at this point whatever tension exists is confined to this dominant ruling generation, anxiety will shortly be projected onto the
hypothetical next generation.

And indeed in the stanza immediately following the description of the duke's prowess in beating down his "lordes gente" (43) in a tournament, tension surrounding this as yet unrealized offspring emerges, threatening the marrigae. Even before any child appears, tension surrounding his arrival threatens to upset the orderly, socially and religiously sanctioned marriage which unites the duke and his lady, as after "full seven-yere togeder thei were;/ He gat no childe, ne none she bere (52-3). This inability to produce a child, due to a procreative failure of either the duke or his lady, eventually pushes the duke to warn the lady of their impending separation: "Now mote we part a-twene,/ But ye myght a childe bere/ That myght my londes weld and were!" (57-9). In short, unless the lady can bear him a child, their marriage will end; an acceptable marriage for the duke centers not around marital bliss derived from his relationship with his wife, but upon an heir produced by his wife. The preservation of the marriage comes to depend upon the birth of a child, and thus even before there is another generation, generational tension threatens to destroy the marital life of the lady.

The lady's response to this threat to her marriage is to pray "to Crist and Marie mylde/ Shulde hire grace to have a childe,/ In what manner she ne rought" (64-6); in her desperation she prays for a child at any price, thinking that no cost would be too great to save her marriage. Following
this rash, desperate prayer, the lady is visited in the orchard by a man who appears to be her husband, who makes love to her. After their intercourse, the man drops his disguise and announces that he is the devil and that "I have gete on the/ A childe that yn his youghte wild shal be/ His wepen for to welde" (76-8). In an attempt to fulfill her necessary function as bearer of the next generation, the wife finds herself in an even more desperate situation.

Demonically impregnated with a son who will be Satan's weapon in his youth, the wife nonetheless takes the inevitable step of attempting to contain the tension surrounding this misbegotten child. Retreating from the semi-public space of the garden to her chamber "strong of belde" (81), she begins the process of containment, telling her husband that she received divine word from an angel that she would conceive a child. As in Lai Le Freine, when the incipient younger generation introduces the first hint of tension, the mother immediately attempts to confine and channel it; both women try to normalize an exceptional pregnancy, and it is the failure of each to do so completely enough which allows the tension to explode and bring the lai to its climax.

Accordingly, though this technique of containment is successful during her pregnancy, upon the child's delivery, it is immediately clear that the baby's supernatural paternity will not only free the young Gowther from any attempt at containment, but will actually leave him at least temporarily
victorious in this new battle between the generations. His true paternity places him outside the normal channels for managing generational tension, and indeed places him in complete control of the familial structure; in this case generational tension runs so completely amuck that young Gowther, even from his birth, dethrones his father as head of the family and completely destroys the authorial structure not only of his own family, but also of the families composing the court of his father the duke. Gowther’s only action in his early life is that of destroying families.

In fact, in the first year of his life, Gowther makes significant inroads into the disintegration of the court of his father, as he kills each of his nine nurses, quite literally sucking them to death. Since each of these nurses were "nobil knyghtes wifes" (112), Gowther has denied the procreative power of each of these nine families, thus significantly reducing the power of the court to perpetuate itself; Gowther’s earliest actions are designed not only to destroy the individual families of all those surrounding him, but by extension to destroy the political family of the realm of his father the duke. Each family that comes into contact with young Gowther is soon fragmented, thus sparking a kingdom-wide frenzy of generational tension directed against Gowther.

As the knights assemble, the motif of the game, introduced earlier in the tournament celebrating the marriage,
reappears. This time, however, the tension which had been veiled and contained by the ritualized aggression of the tournament escapes any playful disguise, as the knights recognize, "Forsoth, this is no game!" (122). The tension which had subtly surrounded the marriage from its outset now erupts as the knights in effect order their lord to control his murderous son, who had "slein hire ladies soo" (123), thus potentially disrupting the knights' paternal function before the all-important heir had been conceived.

The knights' demand that no more of their ladies be selected for the deadly honor of nursing Gowther contains the generational tension within the duke's family, which is now solely responsible for Gowther's rearing with none of the traditional help from the community; it consequently concentrates and intensifies the generational trouble within the family. Denied all other nurses, Gowther's mother attempts to nurse him, at which point he "tare oon side of hir brest," and "the lady cried after a prest" (130-1), and flees her son's nursery. As in Lai Le Freine, when generational tension within the family becomes too strong to be contained, the church is called in to mediate. This begins Gowther's long and tumultuous relationship with the church; at this point, however, the baby Gowther still holds the reins too tightly for the church to influence his behavior. In this case, the tension is so rampant, and so gruesomely manifested, that the priest can do little more than call in a doctor to
see to the lady's wound. If the devil and the church are doing battle for Gowther's soul, at this point Gowther's demonic paternity definitely dictates his behavior, exclusive of any mandates of the church.

With the church's temporary inability to contain Gowther's voracious, indeed cannibalistic, malice toward his parents, Gowther is left free to seize complete control of the family; his goal is apparently to consume completely the power and function of both his parents, which he accordingly does. Shortly after the gory nursing episode with his mother, the poem reveals that Gowther grew six times faster than other children, learned to ride, "waxed wikked in all withe" (142), and totally escapes his father's power to chastise him. With his familial power completely lost, the duke makes his abdication symbolically official as he "gaf him his best swerde in honde" (145), and shortly after this abdication dies. With his ruling power and social function scorned and lost, the duke is politically and socially dead, and his actual death leaves Gowther holding the familial sword and ruling the land. In this tale of the drive to produce an heir gone haywire, and the resultant horror of the demonically spawned first son, the most extreme of nightmares of generational tension is realized, as a son, rather than continuing his father's bloodline and political status, quite literally consumes the functions of his parents, leaving them both empty, useless, impotent shells.
With both his parents out of the way, his father dead and his mother hiding in a distant castle, Gowther is left free to wreak havoc on the kingdom, which lines 163 through 198 catalogue. Gowther's chief crimes consist of attacks on social and religious institutions, mostly aimed at destroying social and familial order. The same drive that led him to destroy his own family and those of the ladies who nursed him leads him to despoil virgins, "take wyfes agayn here will,/ And sle here husbondes, too" (190-192). Gowther's secular evils manifest themselves predominantly in acts of generational tension, acts which disrupt bloodlines and ruin dynasties. His hostility toward the church and the church's inability to contain it, which began as early as the church's failure to save Gowther's mother from bodily harm in nursing her son, manifests itself in burning abbeys, forcing "prestes and clerkes to lepe on cragges,/ Monkes and freres to hong on knagges" (193-4). In short, any institution or organization which denotes social or religious order is a threat to Gowther's satanic anarchy, and must be destroyed; his life at this point depends upon his ability to contain those same institutions which would contain him.

Gowther's anarchistic violence, however, is quickly checked when he realizes that far from conquering and subsuming the power of his progenitors, he is actually serving as the vehicle for his true father's evil ends. When "a good old erll of that contree" (199) pointed out to Gowther that
his constant and uncontrollable evil is a sign that he is "bissibe the devel of hell" (206), or the offspring of the devil, Gowther immediately confronts his terrified mother at sword-point, demanding that she reveal the truth of his paternity. Upon her revelation that his father is the devil, Gowther, saddened, vows to go to Rome "to leve upon other lore" (231), or learn other rules to live by, and "gan to cry, 'Mercy!'/ To Jhesu, that Marie bore" (233-4). It is only upon his realization that he has not defied his father, but actually played into his father's hands, and indeed been the ignorant dupe of his true father, that Gowther turns to the church which he had so often and so blatantly defied. Gowther's submission to the church and its paternialistic authority is actualy less a submission than a route to victory over the father who had so completely controlled him during his youth--even Gowther's decision to abandon his evil ways and live by the authority of the church fathers is dictated by the generational tension that reemerges when he realizes that he overpowered the wrong man, a man who was not actually his father, while unwittingly remaining at the hands of his true father.

Upon this realization, Gowther willingly submits to the church as a vehicle of containment, and this submission constitutes the turning point of the lai. Whereas the first portion of the poem had narrated Gowther's atrocious attempts to escape and live outside of all authority, the second half
narrates the process of his submissive atonement for these crimes, an atonement prescribed by the very church which he had so frequently brutalized in the earlier sections of the lai. But his submission is incomplete and, to some extent, suspect. When the pope outlines Gowther's penance, his first condition is that Gowther lay down the sword his father gave him, or, in essence, abdicate the power he unlawfully attained within his family; Gowther refuses this condition, retaining the sword, and thus retaining his chief position of control. Whatever indignities he will face during his penance, they will always be tempered by his knowledge that he still holds the sword of familial power. Even in his penance, Gowther refuses to give up the power he won with his supernaturally evil prowess, which raises the second reservation within his otherwise submissive penance, namely, his motive. His turn to the church is motivated by the generational tension he experiences upon learning that he had not escaped, but served, his true father, and thus his conversion and containment are, to a certain extent, hollow. Just as he turned to extreme evil to wrest control from the duke, whom he believed to be his father, he turns to the church to wrest control of his life from Satan, who turns out to be his real father. Thus, even though he submits to the authority of the church, with his record of generational tension and the symbolic sword hanging over the text, the sincerity and degree of his submission remain suspect.
To the extent that Gowther does carry out the penance declared by the pope, however, he finds himself engaged in an abdication of the power that he spent the first portion of the lai exercising. The pope's decree specifically takes from Gowther the two manifestations of power that Gowther had most obviously enjoyed earlier—eating and riding. The first signs that Gowther was exceptionally and dangerously powerful were his voracious and destructive appetite and his uncanny ability to ride, which allowed him to assume the status of knight long before he had earned it otherwise. In a mirror image of these exercises of power, the first signs that Gowther is entering a phase of submission are his adherence to the pope's order that he "walk north and sowthe,/ And gete thi mete owt of houndis mouth" (283-4). Rather than relying on his all-consuming appetite and knightly prowess to insure his ability to satisfy his desires, he must now learn self-denial, getting his food from the mouths of dogs, humbly walking around the kingdom, and refraining from speaking. Gowther's penance, as designed by the church, is a program of reinvention, in which Gowther's identity will be molded and eventually reshaped into a form more suitable to containment within the bounds of acceptable social institutions.

Since Gowther spent his youth as the ultimate vehicle of generational tension, it is not surprising that he spends his period of penance healing a situation of generational tension which he encounters during his wandering; in keeping with the
mirror image nature of the second part of the lai, Gowther now must learn to overcome the sort of tension that he spent his earlier days producing. Under the identity of Hobbe the Fool, Gowther resides under the table in the foreign court of Almayn, where he falls in love with the ruler's daughter. This love is complicated not only by the nature of Gowther's identity-effacing penance, but also by the desire of the Persian sultan to marry her himself. When the ruler refuses to marry his daughter to a heathen and the sultan vows revenge, Gowther finds himself once again immersed in a situation of the interruption of bloodlines by a non-Christian suitor, this time not as the product of the interruption, but as the agent responsible for preventing the disruption. As the sultan and the emperor fight over the daughter, who sparks such international distress as to become herself a vehicle of generational anxiety, Gowther sets out to fight for the emperor and his daughter. When war breaks out over the disposition of an heir (the daughter), Gowther finds himself in the unique position of fighting to resolve the tension which he had so violently spread earlier in the lai.

It is, in fact, in the process of fighting for the emperor's right to dispose of his daughter as he pleases that Gowther is finally able to rid himself of the stigma of his supernatural paternity and realign himself with God the Father. When Gowther finally kills the sultan, and is himself wounded in the process, the daughter falls from her tower,
ejecting herself, and, as it turns out, Gowther too, into the public realm. After awakening from a swoon, she announces to Gowther that "My Lord of Hevyn greteth the well;/ Foryeve ben thi synnes, every dell,/ And graunteth the His blysse/ He byddeth the speke boldely,/ To ete and drynk, and make the mery;/ Thowe shalt ben on of His" (613-8). The pope seconds this, announcing to Gowther, "Now art thow bycome Godes child" (625). It was only in the process of learning to contain the generational tension on which he had thrived, and to himself be contained within the institutions designed to manipulate and channel such tension that Gowther could be realigned with the powers of good and rid of his satanic paternity, becoming a child of the church. Accordingly, among his first acts as forgiven man are those concerning the disposition of lands and realignment of family ties. He gives away his father's lands to the old earl who initially warned him of his true father, and marries him to his mother. He then returns to the empire of Almayn, marries the daughter for whom he had fought, and, upon the death of the emperor, becomes ruler himself. One of the chief lessons Gowther learned during his penance and absolution was how to handle families in such a way as to eradicate generational tension—Gowther has learned the invaluable lesson of containment.

Eventually, Gowther embraces the church so wholeheartedly as to become a saint, Saint Gotlake, who performs healing miracles, reminiscent of the corrective acts which he had to
perform as the chief element of his penance. Once Gowther learned to overcome the generational tension which dominated his early life, he was free to enter the power structures of church and state, which he had existed outside of during his period of generational warfare. In this quintessential tale of generational tension, the tension takes on supernatural proportions as the product of demonic interference in family life. And it is the resolution of this tension which allows for an infinitely successful and happy life. In Sir Gowther, generational tension becomes the one obstacle standing in the way of satisfactory resolution of all the characters' lives, and it is the lesson of containment of this tension that comprises the progression of the lai. Generational tension not only influences the action in Sir Gowther, it actually determines the action and is the gauge by which the progression of the protagonist toward embracing God and state is measured. And as Gowther's progress is measured by his simultaneous mastery of tension and submission to agents of social control, generational tension in Sir Gowther is a public issue, one which threatens the orders of church and state, one which cannot be contained within any sort of private realm.

While in Sir Gowther the greater part of the generational anxiety plays itself out in the public realm, with little hope of containment until the chief agent of this tension, Gowther himself, voluntarily submits to it, Emare is a lai almost
completely composed of various attempts to contain generational tension within specifically private spaces; the focus of Emare is not so much on the generational tension as it is on the repetitive techniques of manipulating the public-private interplay in such a way as to contain, or even eliminate, the tension Emare sparks in her elders. In essence, the plot of Emare boils down to a series of complications, banishments, and final confrontations, each sparked by generational tension. The various leave-takings which characterize the action of the lai inevitably break up a family, leaving it in a state of disorder, a disorder that is mirrored in the political and social situation, and thus must be contained in order to insure the well-being of the political system. In each of these cases, Emare is the scapegoat for the tension that erupts and, in various attempts to control the public spectacle of generational tension, is relegated to the private space of banishment or death.

After a brief invocation to "Jhesu, that ys kyng in trone" (1), the lai moves on to describe a short-lived scene of domestic bliss, one that will be disrupted by the death of the mother, leaving the familial roles skewed and leading to the first outbreak of generational tension. This ideal marriage, which had united Artyus, "the best manne/ In the worlde that lyvede thanne" (37-8), and Erayne, "full of love and goodnesse," the most "curtays lady" of the land (35-6), produced one child, Emare, "the fayrest creature borne/ That
yn the land was thoo" (50-1). At this point, the familial situation is fairly solid, if not perfect, with a powerful man married to a beautiful lady and an heir already insured, and the only potential problem being the gender of the heir. Overall, however, the family situation is balanced and stable.

All this is disrupted by the death of the mother, which shatters the family and leaves the way free for generational tension to begin to make inroads into this royal family, upon whose stability the kingdom depends. After Erayne's death, the familial position of the mother is left vacant, so Emare is sent to a foster mother, Lady Abro, who "tawght hyt curtesye and thewe,/ Golde and sylke for to sewe/ Among maydenes moo" (58-60). In a foreshadowing of the pattern of banishment which characterizes the lai, Emare, upon the first disruption of her family—the death of her mother—is removed from her home and familial position to be schooled in her duties as lady of the family and of the house. Ominously, however, she is taught her familial duties by one completely outside the family, in the absence of any familial representative. Thus, even in its earliest stages, her interaction with her family is characterized by dealing at a distance with the head of the household, in a position of "banishment" from the familial structure which should be containing her. Ironically, following the dissolution of her family upon the death of her mother, Emare is removed from the remnant of her family in order to learn her familial duties,
which raises questions of how smoothly her interaction with her father will run once she is returned to her family, and exactly what her position will be in that motherless family unit.

This question is further complicated by the news that her father has never remarried, but chose to "ledde hys lyf yn weddewede" (77), or to live as a widower, leaving the position of mother and wife unoccupied. With this familial position of lady of the house open, Emare will be free to assume it once she returns to the family; unfortunately, Artyus wants her to assume the position too completely. Upon the departure of the visiting king of Sicily, who gave Artyus "a ryche present.../ A cloth that was wordylye wroght" (82-3) with embroidered scenes from the lives of famous lovers, Artyus "after hys dowghter hadde longyng/ To speke wyth that may [maid]" (188-9). In an ominously bizarre transition, Emare suddenly returns to her father's home after a fifty-line interlude of Artyus studying the pictoral tales of immortalized lovers apparently sparks his desire to see his long-absent daughter. The history of the cloth, in fact, is one of the misdirection of affection among generations. Woven by a pagan woman and intended to win the affections of the son of the Sultan of Babylon, the cloth was eventually given to the Sultan himself; a love token meant for a lover ends up as a gift to the lover's father.

In keeping with this strange linkage of lovers and
daughters, immediately following Emare's reunion with her father, he falls in love with her and decides to marry her; Emare's return to the position of lady of the house, for which she has been trained and which Artyus has held open for her, becomes all too complete. And with this disruption of the relations within the royal family, the whole political and social structure is disrupted. This disorder within the royal family is immediately reflected in the all-important mechanism of social control—the church—which, since "they durste not breke hys [Artyus'] commandment" (236), gives a papal dispensation for the marriage of Artyus and his daughter Emare. When the royal family becomes entangled in the incestuous disruption of normal lines of procreation and inheritance, the governmental institution represented by the ruling family also becomes disordered, taking with it the last refuge of order, the church.

With both the church and the state having failed at regulating Artyus' incestuous desire, it falls to Emare herself to rebell against being pushed into the position formerly held by her mother and thus being denied the opportunity to function as the representative of a separate generation; just as Emare's generation seems on the verge of being absorbed into the elder generation of her father, she asserts the separation of the generations, and generational tension erupts for the first time. In a strange mirroring of the tapestry which was given to Artyus just before he
developed the desire for his daughter, he accompanies his incestuous marriage proposal with "a cloth of golde" (243), but even this magnificent gift does not win Emare over to his plan. In keeping with the public-private interplay which becomes so important in the lai, Emare offers two reasons for her refusal, one public and one private. Her private reason is a religious one, namely that "God of heven hyt forbede/That ever doso we shulde" (251-2); this objection draws a sharp line between her own private, orthodox interpretation of theology, which obviously forbids the incestuous marriage between herself and her father, and the public institution of the church, tainted with political entanglements, which approved this marriage. Her more public reason is the eminently practical objection that if they married and "played togeder in bedde" (254), word would get around, their reputations would be spoiled, and, by extension, the kingdom would suffer. When the older generation, represented by her father and the pope, collude to press her into a marriage that is both "sinful" and, perhaps more to the point, a marriage that would deny her generation its representative in the royal family, Emare rebels, asserts herself as the representative of a separate generation, and defies her father.

Unfortunately for Emare, this assertion infuriates her father; her insistence upon keeping the two generations separate and preserving her rightful place in the family sparks generational tension in Artyus so strong that he
commands her death. Upon the failure of his plan, Emare's presence as a constant reminder of his ultimate inability to manipulate and absorb the threat of the youthful generation would apparently be intolerable, so, like the mother in Lai Le Freine, he begins the process of containment. Unlike Freine's mother, however, the brutality of his initial fury cannot be blunted by any underlings, and his gesture of containment is a banishment which is actually tantamount to death. Setting her out to sea in a rudderless boat, with no food, water, or money, but only the beautiful golden robe, the token of the incestuous marriage that she scorned, he more or less condemns her to death, the ultimate containment, the ultimate constriction to the ultimate private realm.

But as in the other two lais, containment never works out as cleanly as the parent intended, and immediately upon Emare's disappearance over the horizon, her unwitting revenge upon her father begins. As soon as "they lost the syghte" (279) of Emare, Artyus "fell down in a sowenynge" (284), recovering only to surrender to the ultimate admission of generational tension, a wish for his own death, as he mourns, "Alas that Y was made man" (292). Once again, a child has escaped the intended containment, and the representative of the youthful generation has made its parent prefer death to the situation in which he finds himself. When children are squeezed too tightly into too private a space, containment tends to fail, as the child escapes the private space
completely, moving back into a public realm.

Following Emare's second banishment (the first being her removal as an infant following the death of her mother), she floats on the sea for seven days before landing in Galacia, where she is spotted and rescued by the king's squire, Sir Kadore. Ominously, he is only able to spot her by "a glysteryng thyng" (350) which he sees floating off the coast; of course, this is Emare's gold robe, the emblem of the aborted marriage to her father, and thus of the generational tension which has enveloped her and follows her even in her exile, waiting to erupt once again. Until she can figuratively shed the robe of generational tension, her troubles will continue. Changing her name to Egare, or "the outcast," she goes to live with Sir Kadore, where she busies herself instructing his children in "all maner of sylkyn werke" (377). This period, which would initially seem to be a time of idle containment, is actually significant, in that Emare is engaged in instructing the youthful generation; following her tremendous disillusionment by the older, empowered generation, she invests her skills and talents in educating an even younger generation.

Inevitably, though, this period of containment within the semi-privacy of exile, a pseudonym, and servitude in Kadore's home will come to an end, as generational tension is still waiting to be resolved in the more public arena. And indeed, when Emare serves before the king, he falls in love with her
and decides to marry her, a plan to which Emare apparently has no objections. Having rejected an offer to be absorbed by her father's generation in an incestuous marriage, she has earned the right to a union with someone of her own generation. Tension with the older generation still remains unresolved, however, hanging over the proceedings; this time they are manifested by the king's mother, whose familial, social, and political role as lady of the royal house is threatened by Emare's projected presence. Unwilling to be displaced by the upcoming youthful generation of her son, the queen mother declares, "Sone, thys ys a fende/ In thys worthy wede!/ As thou lovest my blessynge,/ Make thou never thys weddynge" (446-449). With this curse from the older generation hanging over the wedding, it becomes apparent that generational tension has not played itself out in Emare's life quite yet.

Following the wedding, there is a brief interlude of marital bliss, reminiscent of Emare's happy family as it appeared quite briefly at the beginning of the lai; just as Emare's original family dissolved under generational tension, however, this one too will fall under the machinations of the grasping, jealous older generation as it attempts to manipulate and control the usurping, youthful generation, and thus preserve its own social and familial position. Shortly after the wedding, Emare "conceived, and wente wyth chylde,/ As God wolde hyt sholde be" (479-80). Unfortunately, however, before the child is born, Emare's husband has to go off to
fight in the crusades; this absent parent figure has already proven disastrous in Emare's life, and will once again disrupt her familial existence, just as it did when her mother was absented from the family by death. With her husband out of the picture, Emare is more or less at the mercy of her mother-in-law, who, of course, is heavily invested in Emare's elimination from this family.

Accordingly, when Emare gives birth to a healthy son, Segramour, the mother-in-law's generational tension explodes; with a new heir to the royal family, her familial position is diminished even more, and she takes desperate measures to contain the two generations which so threaten her. When Kadore writes a letter to tell the king of the birth of an all-important male heir, the king's mother intercepts it, and substitutes a letter saying that Emare gave birth to a horrible three-headed monster. When the king receives word of his monstrous offspring, he is prostrated, and, typically, wishes for his own death in the face of such horrible news (556-7); in Emare, each generation is capable of driving its preceding generation to wish death upon itself, as if the existence of separate generations were mutually exclusive. The king, however, recovers himself in the face of this dreadful news concerning his son, and sends back a letter telling Kadore to care for his family until he returns and can deal with the situation. Once again, the king's mother intercepts the letter, and takes the final step in her plan to
contain the two generations which are causing her such stress and anxiety.

Substituting the king's letter with a letter saying to set Emare and her son "ynto the see/ In that robe of ryche ble" (589-90), the king's mother once again subjects Emare to the containment in the private space of exile or death which she escaped when she married the king and reentered the public realm. Significantly, the queen insisted upon the detail of setting Emare adrift with the same golden robe which has come to signify the generational tension Artyus also thought he was casting out when he banished Emare. Artyus was unsuccessful in his attempt to contain Emare and her golden robe, and so is the queen. After floating for seven days, in a repetition of her earlier banishment, Emare drifts ashore, where she is rescued. This time, however, she has drifted to Rome, the papal city, which is in one sense the source of the tension which drove her from her home in the first place, and her golden robe inspires in her rescuer not awe but fear (697-704), as if he were able to recognize the implication of tension inherent in the golden robe, the gift from her father on the day of their aborted marriage.

Upon being taken in by the rich Roman merchant Jurdan, Emare and her son Segramour pass seven years of containment in the semi-private realm of banishment. As in Lai Le Freine, the narrative is not concerned with periods during which generational tension is in abeyance, and thus this seven years
of containment is passed over with the cursory notation that Segramour has grown to be a capable and well-liked boy (732-744). Obviously, the significance is that Emare and her son have escaped the ultimate containment intended by her mother-in-law—death, and have gone on to lead productive lives as they wait for the final resolution of the generational tension which has determined their lives so far.

This resolution is indeed on the way, as the narrative turns back to Emare's husband, who returns from the crusades to find his wife and son gone. Upon discovering his mother's treachery, the king wants her "brent" (796), but his nobles talk him into merely dispossessing and exiling her (802-4). Thus, in an ironic mirroring of Emare's fate at the hands of her mother-in-law, the king's mother herself narrowly escapes death only to find her worst fears of dispossession and displacement realized. The resolution moves even closer, as Emare's husband decides to go do penance in Rome, and, upon travelling there, ends up staying in the home of Jurdan, the same merchant who houses Emare and Segramour.

Upon recognizing her husband, Emare sends her son out to serve the king, after dressing him ominously in the gold robe. Whether this is intended to remind the king of the generational tension which drove Emare from his home and thus cause him to recognize his son, or whether it is a subconscious act of vengeance, threatening the king with the same tension which so harrassed Emare throughout her life, it
is still a strange and ominous token for her son to wear before his father in the hopes of sparking familial acceptance. It would, in fact, seem to be the token least likely to drive the king to accept his son, but that is exactly what the king does, as he begins to love his son even before he is aware of his identity, and a psychological reunion of the family has begun. Eventually, Emare herself wears the robe before her husband, at which point he recognizes her and a joyous reunion ensues.

The only source of tension yet to be dealt with is the source of it all, Emare's father. He too decides to travel to Rome and do penance before the pope, and once he is there, he too is reunited with the incredibly forgiving Emare. This coincidental, arbitrary, and somewhat spontaneous resolution has led critics to generally negative assessments of Emare, calling the lai "unmistakably a failure...bad both as a romance and as a moral tale" (Kane 22), and, again, unconvincing, since "the moral significance of the poem does not lie in any educational process to which the heroine is submitted" (Mehl 139). A closer look at the lai, however, reveals that the lai can be read as less of a tale of the rewards of patient suffering than an intricate, complicated tale of three generations attempting to become reconciled to one another. In fact, if anything, the lai has rather sinister overtones in its "resolution," as, in the midst of this joyous celebration and Christian unity, Emare still
flaunts the golden robe, the emblem of the generational tension which twice overcame death and banishment, under the eyes of the men closest to her, the men who, knowingly or unknowingly, betrayed her—her father and her husband. With Emare still wrapped in the golden robe, the tension which drove the lai is far from contained or resolved; in perhaps the most pessimistic of all the lais, generational tension escapes all containment and reigns supreme as the lai closes.

To varying degrees, and varying fashions, generational tension drives the plots of each of the three lais discussed. Whether it is the desperate attempt to hide a reputation-spoiling twin in a convent, a son's violent attempts to assert an identity for himself separate from both the beings who claim paternity, or a daughter's repetitive confrontation of generational tension at every turn, each lai holds at its center a concern with the fundamental, archetypal issue of parents and children clinging to, juggling, and finally transferring power among themselves. With entire lives spent garnering social, political, and familial power, it is hardly surprising that the dominant generation feels ambivalent emotions toward the ultimate symbol of familial success—an heir. In addition to being the vessel for continuation of a dynasty, each child is also an individual struggling to assert an identity of its own; it is this timeless interplay between familial responsibility and individual development which provides the tension driving these lais. Tension among the
generations, side by side with affection, desire, and hope shared among the generations, builds kingdoms, spurs personal achievement, and insures the eventual success of the protagonists of these Middle English lais.
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VITA

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