

‘FOR GAMELYN WAS YONGEST HE SHULD HAVE NOUGHT’: (ECONOMIC) VIOLENCE,
OUTLAWRY, AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE IN *THE TALE OF GAMELYN*

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“What do you do when someone invokes the law to take away what you know that only you deserve by right?”¹ For the eponymous hero of the late fourteenth-century poem, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, who confronts this dilemma upon his dispossession and outlawry, medieval law and its representatives prove no aids to justice, but rather obstacles which must be overcome by venturing *outside* of legal bounds. A close reading of the poem examines Gamelyn’s response to social, economic, and political injustice by first establishing the competing inheritance systems at work in the text and determining how those might correspond to or depart from historically documented processes of inheritance as they apply to the lower gentry of the fourteenth century in the East Midland region.² This article continues by exploring the effects of the abuse of those inheritance systems perpetrated by Sir John’s knights and eldest son, also named John,³ in depriving Gamelyn of his allotted lands and property. The neglect of Sir John’s will and testament represents the first instance in a series of unlawful acts motivated by economic gain, leading to the central proposal that John’s subsequent treatment of Gamelyn, including his disinheritance, outlawing, and sentencing to death, closely resembles a pattern of abusive behavior characterized by economic violence.

Today, economic violence, as set out by The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), is understood to refer to “any act or behaviour which causes economic harm to the partner,” including but not limited to “property damage, restricting access to financial resources, education or the labour market, or not complying with economic responsibilities, such as alimony.”⁴ As the EIGE’s definition suggests, economic violence is predominantly understood within the context of intimate partner violence. This paper, however, examines how economic violence operates in an altogether different type of relationship, between two brothers, during a period in which the personal and collective costs of legal and economic exploitation might be violently portrayed, but not necessarily interpreted or named as part of a specific or self-conscious discourse of domestic abuse.

Though *Gamelyn* predates the EIGE’s publication by almost seven hundred years, placing the poem in conversation with recent research on domestic abuse supports a reading

¹ Meredith Skura, “Anthony Munday’s ‘Gentrification’ of Robin Hood,” *English Literary Renaissance* 33, no. 2 (2003): 177.

² Several critics have proposed the East Midland counties as the location of *The Tale of Gamelyn*. See: Geert van Iersel, “The Twenty-Five Ploughs of Sir John: *The Tale of Gamelyn* and The Implications of Acreage,” in *People and Texts: Relationships in Medieval Literature: Studies Presented to Erik Kooper*, ed. Thea Summerfield and Keith Busby, Costerus, n.s., 166 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 113; Edgar F. Shannon, “Mediaeval Law in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” *Speculum* 26, no. 3 (1951): 458; Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed., *The Tale of Gamelyn*, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 2nd ed., TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 185.

³ For clarity, further references to John the elder and John the younger will be distinguished by the respective inclusion or omission of the title, “Sir.”

⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Glossary of Definitions of Rape, Femicide and Intimate Partner Violence* (Vilnius: EIGE, 2017), 48.

which explores a previously overlooked aspect of the medieval ballad and subsequently facilitates a fresh discussion of violence in the text, the motives of its perpetrators, and the effects upon its victims. An examination of these texts side by side draws the medieval and modern worlds closer together through a shared concern with domestic violence; at the same time, it remains attentive to the ways in which these different texts are produced by and respond to their distinctive historical realities. A sociohistorically sensitive approach makes it possible to extract several points of continuity and tension between the ballad's representation of violence and an understanding of abuse today. The poem's portrait of economic violence as an insidious, life-threatening, and non-discriminatory strategy of abuse decidedly challenges assumptions about victim identity in past and present contexts by presenting an atypical victim who frequently and controversially deploys violence himself as part of his method of survival. Once outlawed, Gamelyn and his allies rebel against John's brand of economic violence to restore personal and political justice. Ultimately, Gamelyn's realization of justice and liberation from abuse depend upon several key components: the departure from persecuting forces; the move outside of the law marked by Gamelyn's residence in the greenwood; the forging of homosocial bonds (particularly within that space) in order to carry out a collective resistance against corrupt authorities; and finally, reintegration into the law-abiding community.

THE PROBLEM WITH PRIMOGENITURE: SIR JOHN'S WILL AND INHERITANCE PROCEDURE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The opening situation of *Gamelyn* presents a challenge marked by competing financial interests and filial loyalties. As the reputable knight, Sir John de Boundys lays dying, he proposes to divide his estate between three sons: the eldest, John, a "moche schrewe" [wicked rascal] (line 6);⁵ the middle son, Ote, of whom we are told very little except that he "loved wel her fader" [loved their father] (line 7); and finally, the youngest and "strengest" [strongest] (line 78) son, Gamelyn. One might expect Sir John to divide his inheritance according to primogeniture, given its place as the most widely practiced inheritance system of the period. A succinct dictionary definition recognizes that primogeniture typically confers the rights of inheritance upon the eldest, inevitably, male, descendant and in practical terms usually guarantees him the entirety of his father's estate and associated titles to the exclusion of other heirs.⁶ But if one refers to the translation of Henry of Bratton's contemporary legal treatise, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, it quickly becomes clear that primogeniture is a far more complex practice than it first appears. It is worth quoting the inheritance laws at length to give some idea of this complexity:

[N]o one parcener by reason of primogeniture and seniority may claim for himself all the chief messuages,⁷ though he has the privilege of first choice

⁵ Knight and Ohlgren, *Gamelyn*. All citations to the poem will be from this edition and cited parenthetical by line number. Translations in square brackets are my own.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "primogeniture (*n.*)," accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/151368?redirectedFrom=primogeniture>.

⁷ See *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "mesuāge, (*n.*)" or "messuage, (*n.*)" which gives definition "1. A residence, dwelling house; farmstead; also, a household," accessed May 1, 2020,

because of seniority, as where there are several co-heir parceners and several chief messuages, let the eldest choose first, then the next oldest, then the third and fourth, and so *ad infinitum*, as long as any chief dwelling remains. But if, though there are several, there are not enough for each to have one, let those who have none be satisfied to the value out of the common inheritance.⁸

The key concern of this law is to reach the fairest possible outcome for all parties. Somewhat unexpectedly, primogeniture law attempts to prevent the eldest beneficiary from acquiring a monopoly in household and land ownership by securing shares from the total available property for all heirs. Where it is not possible to meet those requirements, the law states that individuals left without property should receive the equivalent monetary value “out of the common inheritance.” Despite these clear attempts to make primogeniture a more inclusive practice, the “privilege of first choice because of seniority” nevertheless persists, effectively enabling the eldest son to lay claim to the most valuable assets and maneuver himself into a position of disproportionate wealth. While this is a technically legal scenario—after all, the law promises a proportionate, not an equal, settlement for co-heirs—it simultaneously creates a loophole for economic exploitation, as the law fails to stipulate exactly who will be accountable for ensuring that all beneficiaries receive the share to which they are entitled.

This is a particularly salient point in situations involving juvenile and/or vulnerable parties, who may require legal support if unable or unwilling to manage their inheritance independently: for instance, if their messuages are “not delivered at the time of assignment” but withheld until a more appropriate time, such as coming of age. The law provides instructions for such a case: “Let the eldest then choose first, as before [...] and let him who is without a messuage be assigned temporarily something to the value in place of it, in tenancy, until his own is delivered him.”⁹ For the young Gamelyn, whose messuage is indeed withheld until he reaches adulthood, living in John’s household does not afford the level of protection intended by this legal arrangement. In fact, when the elected knights ignore Sir John’s will, they fail to safeguard not only Gamelyn’s inheritance but also his welfare, so that in the absence of another responsible guardian who might prevent the misapplication of primogeniture, John is free to wield control of his brother’s legacy and livelihood.

“Although primogeniture was slower in gaining authority in free socage lands than in those held by military tenure,” Edgar Shannon notes, “by 1284 impartible inheritance among male heirs was the established custom of England.”¹⁰ By the late fourteenth century—the period to which Knight and Ohlgren trace the poem’s origins¹¹—this branch of impartible inheritance known as primogeniture had been established as conventional practice, so it is

https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED27518/track?counter=1&search_id=9440266.

⁸ Henry of Bratton, “The Duty of Extenders,” *Bracton Online* 2.221, lines 4-10. Accessed May 1, 2020, <http://amesfoundation.law.harvard.edu/Bracton/Unframed/English/v2/221.htm>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 19-22.

¹⁰ Shannon, “Medieval Law in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” 458.

¹¹ Knight and Ohlgren, *Gamelyn*, 185. For an outline of the text’s publication date and history, see Stephen Knight, “Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context,” in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 15, 16, 21.

Lucy Ryell, “‘for Gamelyn was yongest he shuld have nought’: (Economic) Violence, Outlawry, and the Pursuit of Justice in *The Tale of Gamelyn*.” *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 4 (2022): 19-40.

admittedly unorthodox, but crucially not illegal¹² that Sir John elects to divide his land and property according to gavelkind,¹³ that is, equally between his sons. Only later does he specify that Gamelyn should have the largest share, including “al myn other purchase of londes and ledes” and “alle my good stedes” [all my other purchased lands and tenants; all my good horses] (lines 61, 62) while John and Ote each receive five ploughs of land (lines 57, 59), a much smaller area by comparison, though substantial on its own terms.

Though there is a glaring disparity between the brothers’ inheritances, it should be noted that Sir John only makes the amendment after the knights have disobeyed his preliminary instruction. In fact, Sir John originally intends to “dresen hem to-rightes” [evenly divide between them] (line 18). In the immediately preceding lines, too, Sir John strives toward an equal distribution of his land:

Fayn he wold it were dressed amonge hem alle,
That eche of hem had his parte”

[He eagerly wanted it divided between them so each would have his part] (lines 15-16).

These lines suggest Sir John’s pressing concern to provide for all three of his sons, an anxiety that is perhaps informed by his own struggle in acquiring land amid a contemporary obsession with ownership;¹⁴ Sir John’s territory comprises a small share of his own “faders heritage” [father’s heritage] (line 58) (presumably, there were siblings who also received a share of the inheritance), while the remaining majority is held in “purchas” [purchase] (line 14) or fee simple, suggesting that it was gathered rather than inherited.¹⁵ Indeed, the poem later suggests this land was bought outright or earned with Sir John’s “right honde” [hand] (line 60), perhaps indicating hard manual labor, although this would likely have been carried out by tenants rather than Sir John himself.

Once the knights have gathered to execute his will, the only stipulation Sir John makes is “forgeteth not Gamelyne my yonge sone” [do not forget Gamelyn, my young son] (line 38), a reasonable request when one considers the uniquely vulnerable position of the youngest son under primogeniture (or even partible inheritance, should his siblings decide to exploit the terms of their father’s will), which carried the real possibility of leaving him dispossessed after their father’s death. Though the same claim could be made for eldest siblings under ultimogeniture or Borough-English, where the right of inheritance belonged to the youngest of a family, this was a far less common procedure. Rosamond Faith compares Borough-English to partible inheritance:

¹² See footnote 17.

¹³ Gavelkind was a type of land-tenure requiring “the payment of rent or fixed services other than military [...] After the Conquest, the Kentish form of socage was distinguished by certain customs elsewhere generally disused (cf. quot. 1702). Of these the most conspicuous was the custom by which a tenant’s land at his death was divided equally among his sons; hence, even in early times, “gavelkind” and “partible land” are used as equivalent terms.” That gavelkind was rarely invoked outside of Kent suggests that Sir John’s desire to separate his holdings in this way would have been considered uncommon practice in the Midlands for this period. See: *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “gavelkind (n.),” accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77175?redirectedFrom=gavelkind#eid>.

¹⁴ Knight, “Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context,” 22.

¹⁵ See Knight and Ohlgren, *Gamelyn*, 220n14.

They seem at first, to be radically different. Borough English looks simply like a rather peculiar form of primogeniture stood on its head [...] But if we turn from the purely legal side of the tenure to the way it must actually have worked in practice, it looks rather different. Many youngest sons must have been well underage when their parents died or retired. Who worked the holding until they were old enough to take over? The most likely answer seems to be that their elder brothers did [...] This working arrangement [...] must have been very like joint, although not partible, tenure in practice.¹⁶

Faith raises a crucial point for consideration; theoretically, the Borough English form of impartible inheritance championed the youngest son as the chosen inheritor of his father's holdings, but practically, age and inexperience could make him unsuitable for managing those resources alone. If his elder brothers saw fit, they could quite easily exploit the opportunity afforded by "joint" tenure and seize the spoils for themselves while working under the pretext of brotherly support. In *Gamelyn*, Sir John acknowledges this possibility and, plainly anxious to prevent the exclusion of his youngest son, advises:

Taket hede to that oon as wel as to that other;
Seelde ye seen eny hier helpen his brother.

[Take notice of that one as well as the other; Seldom you see any heir help his brother] (lines 39-40).

Already alarmed by his firstborn's wickedness and self-interest, Sir John takes reasonable precautions to protect both Gamelyn and "that other," Ote, from dispossession, commanding his trusted advisers to "deleth not amyss" [not to wrongly divide or distribute] (line 37) in a prescient warning of John's forthcoming behavior.

At this point, Gamelyn is not the subject of preferential treatment; his father is simply ascertaining Gamelyn's equal share. If favoritism exists at all, it is the knights rather than Sir John who prove the offenders. As the men enter counsel, they intend to "delen hem alle to on" [give everything to one] (line 43), though they do not specify which son. It certainly cannot be Gamelyn, whose age determines that "he shuld have nought" [he should have nothing] (line 44). It could be Ote, but if Gamelyn's youth proves so significant a factor in denying him the land and property promised him by his father, one can safely assume that John is the "one" to whom the knights refer, since his position as firstborn, according to their same logic, makes him the most suitable candidate for outright or majority inheritance.

What exactly changes the knights' decision to divide the land between John and Ote—speculatively, because it represents the closest compromise between Sir John's will and their own—remains unclear. Perhaps the cause of their resistance is related to John's insinuation that Gamelyn is illegitimate, a "gadlynge" [lowborn or bastard] (line 102) and therefore not eligible for the knightly inheritance. Knight and Ohlgren suggest a substantial age gap between Gamelyn and his brothers, but this is hardly damning proof of either the youth's bastard status

¹⁶ Rosamond Jane Faith, "Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England," *Agricultural History Review* 14, no. 2 (1966): 83.

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or low-ranking birth.¹⁷ With scanty evidence to support John's claim, and in light of Gamelyn's retaliation:

I am no wors gadeling ne no wors wight,
But born of a lady and gete of a knyght.

[I am no lowborn neither no lowborn fellow,
But born of a lady and begotten of a knight.] (lines 106-107)

apparently confirming his noble parentage, it appears more likely that John's accusation is empty slander, providing a convenient excuse to abuse Gamelyn. Nor is it a valid incentive for the knights, who never once allude to Gamelyn's potential illegitimacy. In fact, the only explicit reasoning they provide for neglecting Gamelyn's financial interests proves rather flimsy; if, as the knights reason, "His bretheren myght yeve him londe whan he good cowde" [his brothers might give him land when he comes of age] (line 48), they might equally decide *not* to part with Gamelyn's share once he reaches adulthood. As Faith's study of Borough-English shows, this is an entirely plausible scenario which the knights have either not entertained or simply prefer to ignore in the furtherance of their own agenda: namely, to deprive the juvenile Gamelyn of his rightful portion.

This reading gains momentum upon revisiting Bratton's entry on inheritance law, which outlines several terms and conditions affecting inheritance procedure. Whoever inherits and how much they are eligible to receive depends upon a set of circumstances specific to the individual, including the class standing of the deceased, regional customs, and the number of available messuages. In the case of Sir John, who likely held his tenure in return for military service or payment to the crown, it is the second half of the entry (too long to be cited in full) which applies. This recognizes:

There is a custom in some places that the younger be preferred to the older, and conversely. When a free tenement is held by military service and there are several co-heirs and but one chief messuage, let it be divided among them [...] provided that after it is partitioned the eldest, whether male or female, has his choice because of seniority.¹⁸

Once again, the law instructs that all heirs should be provided with an inheritance, even as it grants the eldest son or (surprisingly), daughter, priority in choosing between shares. The range of factors to be taken into consideration, such as class, wealth, and location, does complicate the executor's role, but even if allowances are made to reflect the complexities of the law and the slightly unconventional nature of Sir John's bequest, the margin for error cannot sufficiently accommodate the knights' willful neglect of his testament. As David Roden explains, "Inheritance laws operated only in cases of intestacy, whereas the tenant was free to dispose of his land before death between *any* members of his family or to someone unrelated to him in *any* proportion that he wished."¹⁹ From a legal perspective, therefore, Sir John's

¹⁷ Knight and Ohlgren, *Gamelyn*, 220n38.

¹⁸ Henry of Bratton, "The Duty of Extenders," *Bracton Online* 2.221-222, lines 29-31;1-2. Accessed May 1, 2020, <http://amesfoundation.law.harvard.edu/Bracton/Unframed/English/v2/221.htm>.

¹⁹ David Roden, "Inheritance Customs and Succession to Land in the Chiltern Hills in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Journal of British Studies* 7, no. 1 (1967): 4. Emphasis added.

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spoken will and testament far outweighs the written laws on inheritance; he is absolutely within his rights to bequeath Gamelyn a larger inheritance. It follows that the knights' decision to place John, toward whom they have already shown a bias, in charge of Gamelyn's inheritance, cannot be so easily defended as a sensible interpretation of the written law, but instead represents a serious breach of Sir John's testament and, by extension, a betrayal of his trust. As Jean Jost opines, the misapplication of Sir John's will and testament constitutes "the first crime of the romance,"²⁰ setting a clear precedent for further abuse, emerging in the extreme form of John's economic violence.

READING ECONOMIC VIOLENCE IN *THE TALE OF GAMELYN*

While medieval law provides instructive solutions to inheritance conflict, it is less helpful in painting a picture of the emotional complexities of abusive relationships. It is therefore useful to turn to more recent research to understand what constitutes economic violence, how it operates, and who it affects, in order to recognize its thematic weight in *Gamelyn*. While its historical distance sets the poem at a temporal remove from current sociological discourse, using the available terminology of domestic abuse enables us to articulate Gamelyn's experience within a current, accessible, and critically appropriate framework; to penetrate another layer of the ballad's complex engagement with issues of law and justice, with personal and political conflict; and to reinforce the text's enduring cultural significance.

Adrienne Adams et. al. explain that economic violence forms "part of the pattern of behaviors used by batterers to maintain power and control over their partners."²¹ Together, these behaviors "control a woman's ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, thus threatening her economic security and potential for self-sufficiency."²² Like others of its kind, this study uses gendered language in order to convey an important and indisputable reality: that women constitute the primary victims of domestic abuse, of which economic violence appears as one variation. That women are disproportionately affected as subjects of domestic abuse, however, does not mean they are *exclusively* affected, and that interpersonal violence is commonly associated with spousal conflict does not preclude a discussion of the ways in which it also exists in alternative relationships and produces victims who might be described as "atypical" in the sense that the subject diverges from standard or popular representations of victims; their identity markers, including gender, race, age, and ability do not always meet cultural expectations or uphold stereotypical portrayals. To talk of Gamelyn as a victim of domestic abuse is not to deny material statistics nor to resist historical reality by ignoring these categories of identity, particularly gender, and the relative power derived from these; on the contrary, it is to pay close attention to the ways in which the abuse persists *in spite*

²⁰ Jean Jost, "Retribution in Gamelyn: A Case in the Courts," in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-Historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 178.

²¹ Adrienne E. Adams et al., "Development of the Scale of Economic Abuse," *Violence Against Women* 14, no. 5 (2008): 563.

²² Adams et al., "Development of the Scale of Economic Abuse," 564.

of Gamelyn's overt masculinization, and in so doing broaden the critical conversation around victim identity.

It is therefore important to preface a discussion of economic violence in the poem with an acknowledgement that women in the Middle Ages held fewer rights than their twenty-first-century counterparts as well as their male contemporaries, who could, broadly and not without exception, exercise power and influence more freely. While Gamelyn is disenfranchised as a victim of abuse in his own household, his overall position in medieval society is comparatively more secure than it might have been for a woman in his place. Women themselves are noticeably absent from *Gamelyn*, with two paltry exceptions: first, there is a passing reference to Gamelyn's dead or otherwise absent mother, described only as "a lady" (line 108); and second, a mention of the protagonist's bride (line 894), who appears only at the very end of the ballad, once the action has been safely concluded, and who, as Knight points out, remains nameless.²³ Strictly defined by her marital relation and denied any substantial agency, this anonymous woman serves as tokenistic proof of Gamelyn's successful rehabilitation as a free man and law-abiding citizen; his redemption and their union are comforting signs of his reinsertion into a more conventional narrative trajectory of medieval romance. Though there are no prominent speaking women subjects to whom we can directly compare Gamelyn's position (their very absence is a telling erasure of influence), one can glean the connection between gender and power from several moments in the text, including the wrestling match, an event to which the discussion will return, and his marriage to a woman who remains unidentified. In this second instance, as throughout the poem, Gamelyn's textual visibility grants him a type of power that is inseparable from his construction as male subject; his representation is varied and undeniably complex, while the one woman present in the text is, at best, an obedient and beautiful wife, "good and faire" (line 894), and at worst, a silenced appendage: an extension of the property bestowed upon Gamelyn and the final object of his possession. Gamelyn's moments of vulnerability and reduced power still operate within a gender- and class-based continuum, which implies the existence of other muted subjects, both more and less powerful than himself, a relativity which is worth bearing in mind even as he provides the focal point of the analysis which follows.

Many of the abusive strategies Adams et. al identify, including "controlling how resources are distributed," "steal[ing], damag[ing], and destroy[ing]" property, and effectively forcing the victim to become "economically dependent on the abuser,"²⁴ are consistent with the methods John employs in the persecution of his youngest brother. First, John exploits the knights' agreement, thereby fulfilling his father's prophetic word. He neglects Gamelyn's basic needs, seizes his lands and property and allows them to fall into disrepair:

He clothed him and fedde him evell and eke wroth,
And lete his londes forfare and his houses bothe"

[He clothed him and fed him badly
And let his lands and houses go to ruin] (lines 73-75).

²³ Knight, "Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context," 20.

²⁴ Adams, et al., "Development of the Scale of Economic Abuse," 556, 567, 568.

John's failure to properly maintain Gamelyn's holdings in accordance with the knights' settlement, itself a violation of Sir John's original terms, clearly demonstrates a succession of economically violent acts. That John neglects to clothe and feed his financial dependent and forces Gamelyn into servitude in the role of "coke" [cook] (line 93), is rendered more disturbing by the confirmation that Gamelyn is at this point only a child (line 105) and thus an especially vulnerable person.²⁵ Gamelyn only confronts his brother once he has come of age, as indicated by his beard-stroking (line 82). Older and wiser, Gamelyn not only recognizes multiple examples of neglect and damage:

He thought on his landes that lay unsowe,
 And his fare okes that doune were ydrawe;
 His parkes were broken and his deer reved;
 Of alle his good stedes noon was hym byleved;
 His hous were unhilled and ful evell dight;

[He thought about his lands that lay unsown,
 And his fair oak trees that were pulled down;
 His parks broken into, and his deer stolen;
 Of all his good horses none was left;
 His house was unroofed and needed repairing] (lines 83-87)

but, more importantly, makes a critical judgement about John's actions: "it went not aright" [this is not right] (line 88). Newly alerted to the injustices of his household, Gamelyn prepares to challenge John's economic abuse: the first real sign of his maturity.

While current studies typically frame domestic abuse within a marital context, the *Tale of Gamelyn* demonstrates that the impact of economic violence is no less believable or harmful when directed against a brother instead of a wife. Dan Anderberg and Helmut Rainer, for example, explain how "economically abusive behaviour within partnerships" arises from "disagreements regarding respective economic roles," resulting in a disruptive and destructive environment that signifies "intrahousehold sabotage."²⁶ John and Gamelyn's relationship represents a living and working partnership rather than a romantic one, but it is similarly jeopardized by disagreements about economic roles; in the ballad, these disagreements are triggered by the unprecedented imbalance of the brothers' inheritances. John's own performance of intrahousehold sabotage reinforces that economic violence intersects with and thrives alongside other abusive tactics, as he repeatedly combines psychological intimidation with physical force to secure and maintain economic control.

When Gamelyn confronts John over his damaged goods, for instance, the latter instructs his men "to fette staves Gamelyn to beat" [fetch staves with which to beat Gamelyn] (line 118) and only relents once he realises the extent of Gamelyn's own "myght" [strength] (line 143), at which point he falsely offers a truce and promises to reinstate and repair Gamelyn's land and property (lines 159-168). John repeatedly deceives Gamelyn in this manner. When Gamelyn

²⁵ Stephen Knight resolves that Gamelyn must have been "a baby at his father's death," since John "has been his guardian for sixteen years" ("Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context," 22).

²⁶ Dan Anderberg and Helmut Rainer, "Economic Abuse: A Theory of Intrahousehold Sabotage," *Journal of Public Economics* 97 (2013): 283.

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departs for the wrestling match, John is outwardly supportive, preparing a horse for his brother (line 187) while secretly hoping that he might “breke his necke” [break his neck] (line 194). When Gamelyn returns, John orders the gate to be shut to “holde hym without” [keep him outside] (line 284), physically barring Gamelyn from his own home. And after Gamelyn hosts an extravagant and expensive feast, yet another economic dispute takes place: John resents Gamelyn’s wasteful spending, while the younger defends:

Of al this sixtene yere I yeve the the prowe,
For the mete and drink that we han spende nowe

[For sixteen years I paid the profit

For the food and drink that we have now consumed] (lines 359-360)²⁷

Again, John manipulates Gamelyn’s naivety and fraternal trust, persuading his brother to be “bounde bothe honde and fote” [bound by both hand and foot] (line 372) in a move supposedly designed to appease his servants. However, John really shackles Gamelyn in order to control and humiliate him, even convincing the tenants of his brother’s insanity by telling them “Gamelyn was wode” [mad or insane] (line 382), an instance of psychological manipulation that would today be termed “gaslighting.” In the same section, John starves Gamelyn for the torturous and potentially fatal length of time of two days and nights (line 382). These examples evidence a strong, cumulative pattern of coercive control and abuse—emotional, physical, and legal—which consistently operates to jeopardize Gamelyn’s welfare and prevent his economic independence or stability while securing John’s own economic prosperity as master of the estate.

Gamelyn’s subject position is by no means straightforward; in fact, his own display of physical violence problematizes the brothers’ textual and ethical positions. Confronting Gamelyn’s own capacity to direct violence against others, to inflict pain and provoke fear, the ballad presents a nuanced picture of its protagonist’s victimized status. Despite his own vulnerability, Gamelyn retains a degree of combative power that, as previously suggested, seems inextricably linked to his gender identity and which he mobilizes against bystanders and social “inferiors.” When John orders his men to beat his brother, Gamelyn arms himself with a “pestel” [club-shaped grinder] (line 122) and incites fear and dread among the household, making them “al agast” [terrified] (line 128). Even before he confronts John, Gamelyn’s physical strength proves such a cause for anxiety, “they doutted hym alle” [they all feared him] (line 78) that nobody in the household dares to “wroth” [anger] (line 80) him. His supporters offer mixed reasons for their loyalty: “Some for Gamelyns love and some for eye” [awe] (line 129), but all “dredde him ful sore” [fear him] (line 307) once the full extent of his force

²⁷*Middle English Dictionary* gives several definitions for *yēve*, including: “1. (a) That which is given or offered freely; a gift, present; (b) the act or action of giving 2. (a) A grant or bequest of property; 3. (a) A gift given as a reward; (b) a contribution of money, goods, etc. given as tribute.” It is likely that Gamelyn uses the word in either its first or third sense, to argue that he has earned the feast through financial payment or, more likely, given the reference to sixteen years, in exchange for his household services. It is an interesting coincidence, however, that when the second sense of the word, “a grant or bequest of property,” is substituted, Gamelyn’s line becomes an ironic comment about paying for the feast by surrendering his inheritance. See: *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “*yēve*, (n.),” accessed May 1, 2020, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53942>.

culminates in the porter's murder, an event which "complicates the tale and does nothing to stir audience sympathy."²⁸ While Gamelyn is understandably angered by the porter's obstruction, his ensuing attack is demonstrably gratuitous: as the gatekeeper attempts to flee, Gamelyn

overtake the porter and his tene wrake,
And girt him in the nek that boon to-brake

[overtakes the porter and injures him in revenge
and strikes him in the neck to break his bone] (lines 301-302)

before throwing him into a well (line 303). Gamelyn's explicit intention is to kill the man who stands in his way. He later attacks John's guests when they fail to plead for his release, beating "Abbot or priour, monk or chanoun" [Abbot or prior, monk or canon] (line 505) with staves. By striking holy men and breaking "the kingges pees" [king's peace] (line 544), Gamelyn commits a particularly medieval offense, perverting the feudal hierarchy which insists on submission to both godly and monarchical authority. Then, in another burst of aggression, he breaks his brother's "rigge-boon" [backbone] (line 533). Having ignored Gamelyn's request for aid, the churchmen can hardly be seen as blameless innocents, but the sheer brutality of these episodes demonstrates that Gamelyn falls far from an immaculate heroic model; like John, he transgresses both common and moral law.

Within the context of his abuse, however, Gamelyn's actions appear closer to a conscious inversion of oppressive power dynamics, epitomized by the image of Gamelyn restraining John in the same fetters "theras he sat arst" [where he sat before] (line 534). This inversion appears to have a playfully parodic edge, as Knight argues that Gamelyn skilfully appropriates religious metaphor ("assoile") and double meaning ("spire") to mock the clergy and undermine their authority.²⁹ While Gamelyn's strategies of defense depend largely upon his physical strength, his linguistic agility demonstrates that his resistance to abuse incorporates verbal, as well as violent, protest. The violence perpetrated against these churchmen might also reflect the contemporary "widespread and varied anti-clerical feeling"³⁰ frequently expressed by Robin Hood ballads, so that the scene, while not entirely divested of its power to shock or disgust, may have invited those who shared in this popular anti-clerical sentiment to view Gamelyn in a more favorable, antiheroic light. While Gamelyn's violence frustrates modern expectations of the benign outlaw, Richard Green suggests, "One possible explanation of the appearance of such brutality is that it is nothing other than simple, unvarnished realism."³¹ Barbara Hanawalt corroborates that "real outlaws were felons who were very much dreaded," though they could be molded into "either a villain or a hero"³² to support political or ideological

²⁸ Jost, "Retribution in *Gamelyn*: A Case in the Courts," 180.

²⁹ Knight, "Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context," 24.

³⁰ J. C. Holt, "The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood," *Past & Present* 18 (1960): 95.

³¹ Richard Firth Green, "Violence in the Early Robin Hood Poems," in "*A Great Effusion of Blood?*": *Interpreting Medieval Violence*, ed. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 271.

³² Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Portraits of Outlaws, Felons, and Rebels in Late Medieval England," in *British Outlaws of Literature and History: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Figures from Robin Hood to Twm Shon Catty*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 45, 46.

Lucy Ryell, "'for Gamelyn was yongest he shuld have nought': (Economic) Violence, Outlawry, and the Pursuit of Justice in *The Tale of Gamelyn*." *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 4 (2022): 19-40.

demands.³³ If the need to reflect historical reality supersedes a desire to create a flawless hero, this might account for the more disagreeable elements of Gamelyn's character at the same time that it complicates his moral orientation.

That much of Gamelyn's violence takes place before he becomes an outlaw is also significant. Confronted with John's abusive tactics, Gamelyn exercises his strength in self-defense as a measure of protection against and survival of abuse. In another scene preceding his outlawry, Gamelyn's violence is motivated not so much by a desire to defend himself as to help others in need. At the wrestling match, Gamelyn encounters a franklin, who laments that the current champion has threatened the lives of his sons.³⁴ Gamelyn swiftly intervenes to save the franklin's family; he fights the champion, throws him down, breaks three of his ribs (line 245), and ultimately wins the match, with his defeated opponent reluctantly acknowledging Gamelyn's fighting prowess: "I was nevere in my lif handeled so sore" (line 258). The wrestling sequence locates the male body as both the source of power and the site of violent struggle, simultaneously acting and acted upon. Indeed, the fighting takes place in a distinctly gendered space, where the potential female presence is eliminated: the stock damsel in distress is replaced by a despairing franklin, who nonetheless requires a timely rescue by the masculine hero. The public spectacle of Gamelyn wreaking vengeance on behalf of another vulnerable party impresses upon his peers Gamelyn's potential to cause serious physical harm, but it simultaneously forges an association between his corporeal power and social conscience: for the franklin, Gamelyn is not persecutor but protector, one who alleviates suffering by challenging the true tormentor. Gamelyn's rescue of an all-male family unit casts a sideways glance at his own fractured household and relays the text's homosocial thrust, which resurfaces during his period of outlawry. His part in the wrestling contest moreover bears out Mark Meyerson's observation that "in medieval society [...] violence was integral to the processes through which social status was contested and affirmed and economic resources allocated within communities, essential to the creation and maintenance of social order."³⁵ Though Gamelyn confidently asserts a further challenge, nobody takes up the offer:

Ther was noon with Gamelyn that wold wrastel more,
For he handeled the champioun so wonderly sore.

[There was no one who would wrestle further with Gamelyn,

³³ Robin Hood himself has been variously interpreted as a noble outlaw, a murderous and merciless fugitive, and a protosocialist who redistributes wealth by stealing from the rich to give to the poor. On Robin Hood's mythologization and co-opting for conservative, liberal, and radical ends, see especially these studies: Meredith Skura, "Anthony Munday's 'Gentrification' of Robin Hood"; Stephanie L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Wilson, "'Like the Old Robin Hood': *As You Like It* and the Enclosure Riots," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992): 1-19; and Peter Stallybrass, "'Drunk with the Cup of Liberty': Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England," in *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Routledge, 1989), 45-76.

³⁴ There appears to be an inconsistency in the text, as the franklin initially claims his sons have been killed or "sclayn" [slain] (l. 204), but they are later recovered (line 251).

³⁵ Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk, "Introduction," in "*A Great Effusion of Blood?*": *Interpreting Medieval Violence*, ed. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), 5.

Lucy Ryell, "'for Gamelyn was yongest he shuld have nought': (Economic) Violence, Outlawry, and the Pursuit of Justice in *The Tale of Gamelyn*." *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 4 (2022): 19-40.

Because he had handled the champion so sorely.] (lines 265-267)

Having asserted his own social status as a formidable fighter and restored order, Gamelyn retires from the sporting contest, limiting his violence to its function as a necessary component in the resolution of socioeconomic conflict, whether that takes place between the two brothers or members of their wider community.

As he progresses towards this resolution of conflict and the pursuit of justice, Gamelyn undergoes a recognizable transition, moving from violence to compliance with legal processes. This is a development undoubtedly accelerated by fraternal bonds. When his former serfs forewarn Gamelyn of his indictment “for hate and for ire” (line 694), he does not resort to physical violence or attempt to evade punishment in the manner of the notorious Coterel gang³⁶ but vows instead to attend the shire-courts as the law requires. This development suggests that a maturation or, in Renée Ward’s phrase, “a process of tempering” has taken place, one dependent upon “the establishment of appropriate social bonds or relationships.”³⁷ Until this point, Gamelyn’s companions have often proved fickle or disingenuous, serving him out of self-interest or fear: Gamelyn’s feasting company depart once their hunger is satiated, leaving their host in a state of despair or “ful woo” [woe] (line 333), while Adam frees Gamelyn explicitly because he is promised a material reward, “free londes” [lands] (line 406) in return.³⁸ Only through the relationships forged in the greenwood, the space of outlawry, does the protagonist learn to adjust his response to injustice and abuse.

OUTLAWRY AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

If law maintains order, outlawry invites disorder, and the space the outlaw occupies signifies, too, “the site of disorder and unpredictability [...] a place of isolation and danger.”³⁹ Conceived in this way, the greenwood poses a legitimate threat to outsiders, as the early ballads *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* and *A Gest of Robyn Hode* testify.⁴⁰ Accounting for such incidents, it is somewhat unsurprising that the predominant emotive response to the forest is fear. However, *Gamelyn* offers an alternative possibility. In place of danger and isolation, the greenwood provides safe refuge and company. The space is certainly conducive to the formation of friendships, and these homosocial bonds prove especially vital for Gamelyn when

³⁶ John Scattergood comments thus: “When in 1332 a concerted attempt was made to round them [the Coterels] up they were forewarned by a messenger and letter and avoided capture.” See John Scattergood, “*The Tale of Gamelyn: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero*,” in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 171.

³⁷ Renée Ward, “The Social Contracts of ‘mete and drink’ in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” in *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales*, ed. Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Bovaird-Abbo, *Outlaws in Literature, History, and Culture* 8 (London: Routledge, 2020), 47.

³⁸ Ote and the outlaw band, on the other hand, demonstrate unconditional loyalty; the former stands surety for his brother without guarantee of his reappearance, and the latter come to his aid without a clear ulterior motive, simply stating “Ordeyn how it shal be and it shal be do” [Ordain how it shall be and it shall be done] (l. 794).

³⁹ Antha Cotton-Spreckelmeyer, “Robin Hood: Outlaw or Exile?” in *British Outlaws of Literature and History: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Figures from Robin Hood to Twm Shon Catty*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 140.

⁴⁰ Robin brutally murders Guy and disfigures his corpse in the greenwood, while in the *Gest*, Little John tricks the Sheriff of Nottingham into entering the forest, where he will meet his nemesis, Robin.

he faces the death penalty and relies upon support to confront corrupt local justices. Though it is true that Gamelyn and Adam are initially apprehensive as they “stalked stille” [walked cautiously] (line 613) into the greenwood, the outlaws confess that “noon of hem [...] wolde do hym harme” [none would do him harm] (line 649) once they realize that Gamelyn’s fighting prowess could prove a challenge (or more optimistically, an asset) to their company. The outlaw master astutely neutralizes any threat by turning a potential enemy into an ally, and the two newcomers quickly adapt to their environment. Here, Gamelyn and the outlaw band, while technically placed outside of the central regime, closely reproduce its ordered processes. Gamelyn’s flight to the forest ostensibly represents an escape from common law; however, the greenwood is not an entirely unregulated arena. As Alex Davis explains, forests

are spaces outside regular jurisdiction, yet within their own “proper” laws. Forests were supplied with their own legal officers, the forest wardens, who appointed foresters, and who worked under the ultimate supervision of the two justices of the forest. They have their own courts (the “Swainmote”), which enforced a distinct body of regulations relating to “vert” and “venison:” the forest law.⁴¹

Gamelyn’s escape from the law, then, is to some extent illusory; the code of the forest succeeds common law, so that the new world he inhabits partly imitates the realm from which he has fled. Still, this period of outlawry provides an alternative hierarchical model to Gamelyn’s family structure, where, under his brother’s oppressive household rule, he held a subordinate serving role. By contrast, in the greenwood’s extrafamilial unit—a reconstituted band of brothers who take the place of his biological siblings—Gamelyn climbs the social hierarchy by accepting a position of leadership, thus ironically appropriating a type of power typically reserved for the eldest son in the law-governed world. Upon entering the greenwood, Gamelyn relates his history to the master outlaw, who, clearly impressed by Gamelyn’s fortitude, makes him deputy, the “maister under hym over hem alle” [master under him over them all] (line 682). Within just three weeks of Gamelyn’s arrival (line 683), the existing leader receives news that his “pees was made” [peace] (line 685), swiftly announces his departure and promotes Gamelyn to “maister outlawe” or “kinge” [master outlaw; king] (line 690) in his place.⁴² The unnamed leader, bearing an obvious resemblance to Robin Hood, re-enters the society from which he was exiled, illustrating the easy transition between law and outlawry and the social slippage associated with such a move. It also provides an optimistic foretelling of Gamelyn’s own fate; he, too, will make peace and reclaim his knightly status. The title of outlaw king and the speed with which Gamelyn acquires it can hardly be read as an incidental choice, but rather a considered gesture that confirms the depth of Gamelyn’s impression upon these men as a formidable fighter and worthy leader. In a remarkable display of respect and deference, they accept this new master as a rustic replica of the official sovereign.

In effect, outlawry in the forest teaches Gamelyn a new way of life distinguished by the homosocial community that was patently absent from John’s household. Only with this support

⁴¹ Alex Davis, “‘Game’ in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” *Medium Aevum* 85, no. 1 (2016): 109.

⁴² It is also worth noting the parallel between John’s seizure of Gamelyn’s inheritance rights and Gamelyn’s replacement of the existing outlaw master; in the former case, the power shift is a result of force and exploitation, and in the latter it is one of friendly negotiation.

Lucy Ryell, “‘for Gamelyn was yongest he shuld have nought’: (Economic) Violence, Outlawry, and the Pursuit of Justice in *The Tale of Gamelyn*.” *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 4 (2022): 19-40.

is Gamelyn equipped to tackle the unjust forces of the law and reclaim his place in knightly society. By arriving “redy to the nexte shire” [ready to the next shire] (line 711) and removing “his hode amonge tho lords alle” [his hood among all the lords] (line 714), Gamelyn combats John’s economic violence with a comparatively measured, even deferential response which, if failing to redeem the brutality he shows elsewhere, at least reveals a glimpse of “some of the features of more chivalric heroes,” such as “the need to rescue the oppressed.”⁴³ Gamelyn has already saved the franklin’s sons, and now instructs his serfs to “greteth wel myn husbondes” [people of my estates] (line 709), suggesting that his aspiration towards political justice is not purely motivated by his own dispossession but a wider concern for the wellbeing of others.

The significance of successful homosocial bonds in Gamelyn’s pursuit of justice cannot be underestimated, especially because the text is elsewhere plagued by failed or fragile fraternal relationships. In the absence of parents and in the aftermath of fraternal abuse, a theme repeatedly revisited in the knights’ betrayal of Sir John, John’s abuse of Gamelyn, and the negligence of brotherly religious orders, the few friends Gamelyn *can* rely upon prove to be invaluable. Indeed, the reason that Gamelyn can challenge his charge at all is due to his brother, Ote, who declares

I bid hym to maynprise that thou graunte me
To the next sitting of delyveraunce

[I demand bail for him
To the next legal hearing] (lines 740-741).

Displaying selflessness, integrity, and a dedication to duty, qualities befitting a more conventional hero of medieval romance, Ote offers to stand as surety for Gamelyn. In a heroic intervention that echoes Gamelyn’s earlier rescue of the franklin, Ote guarantees his brother’s attendance at the sitting of the justice or else will “bere the juggement” [bear the judgement] (line 746) himself. In other words, he will be punished and hanged in Gamelyn’s place. Though “outlawry was technically not a mainpernable offence,”⁴⁴ John still allows Ote to bear responsibility for Gamelyn’s crimes, showing a blatant disregard for legal procedure.

Although John’s abuse of power might be morally objectionable to both contemporary and late medieval audiences (the poet clearly intends him as a recognizably corrupt figure, as illustrated by the repeated emphasis on John’s falseness, to the extent that “the fals knyght” [the false knight] becomes a synonymous replacement for his name, appearing no less than thirteen times throughout the poem),⁴⁵ one might question whether his actions as sheriff are historically unlawful. Surprisingly, John Scattergood suggests:

[T]here is nothing technically wrong with the process [John] operates: anyone
such as Gamelyn who might be charged with crimes and who failed to appear

⁴³ Rosalind Field, “Popular Romance: The Material and the Problems,” in *A Companion to Modern Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 27.

⁴⁴ Scattergood, “*The Tale of Gamelyn*: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero,” 166.

⁴⁵ See Knight and Ohlgren, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, lines 192, 349, 361, 379, 459, 467, 611, 693, 719, 735, 780, 796, and 879. Stephen Knight similarly identifies the “regular use of a narrow range of confident evaluative epithets” which set the brothers in opposition and signpost Gamelyn’s heroic success: “Gamelyn is ‘consistently ‘yonge’ [...] he is also ‘bolde,’” while John “is consistently ‘fals’ and often also ‘fickle’: he has neither truth nor constancy on his side.” See Knight, “Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context,” 25.

at three successive sessions at the shire-court to answer these charges was liable at the fourth shire-court to be pronounced outlaw [...] When Gamelyn appears at the next “shire” [...] the sheriff will not let him protest his outlawry, but he attaches him and has him imprisoned, again *a proper interpretation* of his duties, to await the coming of a justice of gaol-delivery.⁴⁶

While Scattergood argues that John follows due process, the poem alternatively implies that he acts prematurely when he outlaws Gamelyn,⁴⁷ and though John’s apparent compliance with the law in the example above might facilitate a more sympathetic reading of the elder brother, who up to this point has appeared the exemplary villain, this finding is undermined by John’s “hiren” [bribing] (line 782) of a jury to condemn Ote, who is in John’s mind now interchangeable with Gamelyn, to hang: “Though thei had not that oon thei wolde have that other” [Though they had not that one they would have the other] (line 798). Calling into question the efficacy of law and the integrity of its officials, *Gamelyn* closely reproduces contemporary instances of corruption, as Richard Kaeuper notes: “Jurors like those hired to convict Gamelyn appear again and again in petitions and court records,” while sheriffs abused the powers of their office, as in this local example from Lincolnshire: “When Sir Robert Breton was sheriff, he and his brothers and other subordinates accused those they hated of trespass, imprisoned them, held them to ransom, entered their homes, broke open their chambers and chests, seized and carried away their goods.”⁴⁸ Such records indicate that legal corruption in *Gamelyn* finds its basis in historical testimony and confirm that, like the real late medieval sheriffs he satirically represents, John breaks the law and exploits his position in the interest of economic gain.

A small number of other critics have tried to explain, if not defend, John’s abuse. In an impressively thorough analysis of land value in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Geert van Iersel suggests a related reason for John’s cruelty: fear of social and economic ruin. Though Iersel’s calculations are somewhat difficult to follow, the implications of the analysis ultimately provide another means of accessing the text’s engagement with inheritance procedure and its emotional fallout, notably inviting a slightly more moderate view of John once it is revealed that “without additional land, John cannot retain a position in society which is comparable with that of his father.”⁴⁹ “A comparison of the acreages mentioned in the narrative with historical data,” Iersel continues, “yields a clearly delineated incentive for John’s appropriation of Gamelyn’s lands which is not otherwise apparent [...] It undermines the numerous and emphatic suggestions that Gamelyn and John represent opposite sides on a wrong-right scale.”⁵⁰ Alex Davis, who interprets Gamelyn’s violence as part of the poem’s wider engagement with gameplay, similarly points out: “when Sir John the younger arrogates Gamelyn’s legacy to himself he is simply reinstating the socially approved practice of

⁴⁶ Scattergood, “*The Tale of Gamelyn: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero*,” 166. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ There are no shire-court sessions prior to John’s proclamation of Gamelyn’s “wolfshede,” so if Scattergood is correct in arguing that anyone who failed to appear at three successive court sessions could be pronounced an outlaw, Gamelyn is not given ample time to attend these proceedings.

⁴⁸ Richard W. Kaeuper, “An Historian’s Reading of *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” *Medium Aevum* 52, no. 1 (1983): 55, 56.

⁴⁹ Iersel, “The Twenty-Five Ploughs of Sir John,” 119.

⁵⁰ Iersel, “The Twenty-Five Ploughs of Sir John,” 121-22.

primogeniture.”⁵¹ According to these analyses, John appears quite a vulnerable figure once deprived of the inheritance he would have been due to receive under the ordinary circumstances of primogeniture or in the absence of his father’s spoken testament. Considering Iersel’s revelation that without Gamelyn’s land, John could lose his knightly status, his outlawing of Gamelyn seems a rather desperate attempt as sheriff to appropriate his brother’s lands, since “lands and goods of individuals outlawed were forfeit to the king and the individual’s lord.”⁵² This detail provides John with a clear incentive for outlawing Gamelyn: as his brother’s lord, John would be able to claim these lands and goods, and therefore bolster his social status, political influence, and economic power.

However, there is a distinct separation between John’s brand of violence and Gamelyn’s, whose own brutality, Joanna Ludwikowska convincingly argues, becomes more acceptable when read as “self-help” in a situation where law fails to “provide compensation or gratification of a perceived abuse.”⁵³ Discriminating between John’s and Gamelyn’s violence is made possible, then, by recognizing that Gamelyn’s status as a victim of abuse, while not tantamount to moral innocence or heroic virtue, does to a great extent account for his more brutal behavior. While the acts of violence committed by both brothers invite critical judgement and strong condemnation, the younger’s capacity to cause pain and even to murder (notably, the porter and John) emphatically does not negate his own abuse and is more appropriately understood as part of a struggle for personal freedom and political justice after the law and its guardians have failed to protect these. Gamelyn’s violence prompts a reassessment of what it means to be a victim in the first place, undoing the assumption that any person enduring abuse, be they living or literary, must appear weak, submissive to their oppressor, or incapable of resistance, rather than strong, defensive, and prepared to exercise sometimes necessary violence in their struggle for liberation.

This reading helps to explain the frequent defense of Gamelyn’s actions in debates about his ethical position. Rosalind Field, for example, sees the protagonist’s violence as “fuelled by justified anger [...] against corrupt clergy and self-serving local justices,”⁵⁴ while Scattergood adjusts his previous stance to pursue a similar argument, resolving that “John has behaved so badly towards Gamelyn in seeking to disinherit him and have him executed, Gamelyn is justified in the violent and illegal actions that he takes.”⁵⁵ The type of behavior John exhibits, first in his capacity as master of the house, then in his position as sheriff, on the other hand, is symptomatic of systemic violence, working to “sustain relations of domination and exploitation.”⁵⁶ As Slavoj Žižek questions, “Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation, or injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, even armed

⁵¹ Davis, “‘Game’ in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” 108.

⁵² Graham Seal, *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 6. John’s motives are clear: as Gamelyn’s lord, he would receive the lands and goods of his brother once proclaimed an outlaw.

⁵³ Joanna Ludwikowska, “(Breaking) the Law: Social, Control, Self-Help and Violence in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 48, no. 4 (2013): 65.

⁵⁴ Field, “Popular Romance: The Material and the Problems,” 26.

⁵⁵ Scattergood, “*The Tale of Gamelyn*: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero,” 175.

⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 9.

struggle?”⁵⁷ a logical reason emerges for discriminating between the brothers’ violence. Fundamentally, the function of John’s (economic) violence is oppression; the function of Gamelyn’s (physical) violence is liberation from that oppression. Žižek implies that any subject of exploitation, such as Gamelyn, is justified in using violence to achieve their cause. While it is feasible that John has complex reasons for abusing his power, the poem repeatedly betrays their acceptability via a series of intervening narrative judgements (“fals” versus “bolde”) and textual strategies, such as linguistic play, irony, and use of familiar generic conventions. Knight points, for instance, to the appropriation of religious language; the symbolic spatial organization of John and Gamelyn (the former’s placement in the upper part of the household, the latter’s containment in the lower quarters); the “web of value-terms” which differentiate their characters; and the positioning of Gamelyn as a “male Cinderella,”⁵⁸ which consistently reinforce the oppositional dynamic between the brothers and suggest that John’s abrasive style of authority demands a counteractive response, even one which entails “armed struggle.”

Such a violent struggle materializes in the climactic court scene, where Gamelyn and his outlaw company overcome the corrupt representatives of law. Upholding his word, Gamelyn relieves Ote’s responsibility, “unfetter[ing] his brother out of bende” [unfeters his brother from chains] (line 833) and complains to the justice of “domes that bene evel dight” [unjust verdicts] (line 843). Notably, Gamelyn intends to protest peacefully: “I wil into the halle and with the justice speke” [I will enter the hall and speak with the justice] (line 819), and formally requests that the justice give up his seat so he can redress the sentences (line 844). But Gamelyn turns to violence when the unresponsive justice “satte stille and roos not anon” [sits still and does not rise] (line 845). Only as a last resort does Gamelyn “cleved his chekebon” [broke his cheekbone] and throws him “over the barre” [railing] (line 846, 848), before he and his men respectively replace the judge and jury in a symbolic appropriation of the law by those subjects placed outside of its protection. Together, they determine that the justice, sheriff, and “the twelve sisours” [jurors] are “honged fast by the neckke” [hanged by the neck], signaling the end of “trecherye” [treason] (lines 875, 877, 879).

Gamelyn’s rebellious confrontation indicates an overthrow of corrupt authority, the subversive nature of which is further supported by the outcome of the poem, where the king pardons Gamelyn and his men, making Ote justice and Gamelyn “the cheef justice of his free forest” [chief] (line 888), a position, according to John Manwood, which represents “great honoure and high authoritie [...] to bee executed by some great Peere of the Realme, that is always one of the Kings most honourable priuie Councill.”⁵⁹ Gamelyn’s acceptance of this title might seem to reconfirm his submission to local and monarchical authority, but these authorities have been reformed; with the death of John, corruption is corrected and order restored. Knight similarly recognizes the “social-utopian theme” of the ballad’s conclusion and suggests that it would be “an error to think of it as a failed revolution,” though he is less convincing when he argues that here “the restoration of true law is [...] the only objective.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Žižek, *Violence*, 148.

⁵⁸ Knight, “Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context,” 25, 22-23, 25, and 22.

⁵⁹ John Manwood, *Treatise of the Lawes of the Forest* (London: n.p., 1615), quoted in Alex Davis, “‘Game’ in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” *Medium Aevum*, 85, no. 1 (2016): 110.

⁶⁰ Knight, “Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context,” 27.

Though Gamelyn eventually wins back his lands and tenants, he also gains a prestigious title and a wife, achieving far more besides his original aim and settling back comfortably into a reformed social order. Newly tamed, Gamelyn himself no longer poses a significant problem; the threat of the outlaw's violence has been exorcized. Corrupt representatives of law are eradicated and replaced with comparatively honorable individuals, so that the system itself is radically altered. Though Mark Leahy argues that the finale "support[s] the idea that the system in which [the outlaw] operates is impossible to combat,"⁶¹ Gamelyn's symbolic liberation suggests otherwise; injustice and abuse are not merely deferred but altogether defeated, an outcome which depends fundamentally upon the fraternal support that was missing in the earlier sections of the poem. *The Tale of Gamelyn* suggests that outlawry is a temporary adjustment rather than a permanent solution to injustice; the outlaw is permitted only a short absence and provisional disruption of order before he must be re-enfolded within law-governed society. For Gamelyn, this is a return which signifies more than the restoration of true law; it is a return marked by the promise of change, made manifest in the reformation of the justice system, the fulfilment of personal ambition, and ultimately, the realization of freedom as a survivor of abuse.

⁶¹ Mark Leahy, "'Where Shall We Rob?': Fantasies of Justice in the Early Robin Hood Ballads," in *British Outlaws of Literature and History: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Figures from Robin Hood to Twm Shon Catty*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), 215.

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