

Magical Rings in Middle English Romance
An Interdisciplinary Study in Medieval Literature and
Material Culture

By

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Abstract

This thesis argues that studying medieval literature is rarely undertaken with an interdisciplinary approach, and that this lack of contextual understanding has led to interpretations that do not take into account the importance of medieval belief and practice in literary manifestations. The focus of study to illustrate this point is the tradition of magical rings and stones in Middle English romance. This thesis argues that these objects cannot be thoroughly understood in their literary context without taking into account the complex and widespread beliefs and practices that accompany such objects in the historical record. Through understanding the way these objects were used in the medieval period, their roles in the romances take on a far deeper meaning with manifold interpretations.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my academic career.

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Preface

This thesis looks at the significance of magical rings in Middle English romance and the importance of interdisciplinary study to fully understand their functions. In addition, magical stones are addressed, as they hold similar literary roles and meanings that make them relevant to the study. This thesis is arranged in two parts. Part I discusses the history of magical rings and stones, their context in medieval material culture and the material record itself. Part II focuses on the Middle English romances themselves, with close reading of the text to analyse the use of rings and stones in their literary context. This structure is used to show how the material and cultural evidence can be examined separately but then applied to the texts to illuminate the way the objects function in the romance genre. The thesis is completed with a Conclusion and an Appendix including images of rings from the material record to support the literary texts.

Part I

“Jewellery, like all ornament, has its origin in Magic rather than in Aesthetic.”
(Heather 1931, 245)

A statement such as this is bold, but not without foundation when the material culture of the medieval period is considered. It is curious, then, that little observation has been made about the significance of precious stones and rings in the Middle English romances. For these objects occur, and are textually important; in addition, they are prevalent in the historical and archaeological record and imbued with meanings that transcend their literary use. They undoubtedly have more significance than merely serving as part of the fabric of material culture within the romances.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a widely read and much-studied text, there is a fleeting incident wherein the Lady Bertilak offers Gawain a ring. The action in itself, part of the wider game and test of Gawain’s resolve, has been recognised and commented upon by many, but the significance of the ring as her choice of gift, and its particular attributes, have been largely ignored, with only a short paper by Jessica Cooke (1998) devoting any significant comment on it. Why, despite the obvious connection between the use of rings in literature and in their material context, have so many critics failed to recognise the wider implications of the gift in relation to the practices and beliefs of medieval culture? How, in such a popular romance, rich with lavish descriptions of material wealth and its social implications, has such a significant example of medieval ritual and belief been so widely overlooked? Lady Bertilak’s ring and the many other examples of rings and stones in the romances will be fully examined in this study, in an attempt to prove that the medieval audiences of the romances would have recognised a great deal of subtextual interpretation from the specific use of these

objects in their literary context, based on the practices and beliefs that are bound to them in their material form. Surface interpretations of the relationships between these objects in the romances and in their historical context yields a great deal of information about their practical use, however the wealth of additional information about magical belief in the medieval period can be used to shed light on the more complex meanings behind their use. The literature suggests that rings and stones had a significance that transcends the basic representation of material wealth and hints at their importance both as structural and symbolic elements. A study of the non-literary records – archaeological, artistic and documentary – can add a great deal of understanding to this cultural and literary significance.

It is clear that the study of rings and stones in Middle English romance is a subject that deserves more attention and it is through an interdisciplinary examination of both literary and non-literary sources that this can fully be achieved. I believe that the potential for widening the critical understanding of medieval culture in literature is too important to be overlooked, and therefore I propose this study of magical rings and stones in Middle English romance in relation to evidence from the historical and archaeological record. The texts I have chosen mostly belong to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, written during the period in which Middle English romance was flourishing. The notable exception is *King Horn*, which belongs to the thirteenth century. The chronology has less of a bearing on the choice of romances than their content – the texts have been chosen due to their inclusion of rings or stones that seem to have more than a superficial role in their literary context. A major text in this study is *Ywain and Gawain*, as it includes two magical rings and one unusual magical stone, and therefore it will be studied in depth in the close readings.

To fully understand the use of rings and stones, it is important to start with their immediate literary context. Romance is a literary genre originating in the aristocratic culture of twelfth-century France. The lavish and wealthy French courts formed the centre of high culture in Western Europe, leading the way in style, fashion, education and beauty.

The focal points and themes of the romances are sometimes political, sometimes moral and sometimes religious, but consistently concern the deeds of a hero or knight. As well as describing heroic acts and the lavish lifestyles of knights and ladies, the events of the romances are often intertwined with elements of popular belief and culture, particularly magic. Romance is a genre that allows both the audience and the protagonists to transcend to an alternate reality – that is, a place where marvellous beasts, miracles and magical acts can occur and interact with the chivalrous characters, in order to enrich the moral and symbolic meanings of the text. This fantasy world allows the unbelievable to be believable – by placing the tales within a context that exceeds the boundaries of normality. Romance can also be recognised as a genre that had an influence on medieval society as well as culture. Stevens (1973, 50-51) states that romance “is directed towards producing more agreeable people in society” and uses love as a “civilising function”. These statements suggest an overtly didactic approach, used by the writer with the intention of instruction. Such a notion might seem far-fetched in the context of literature often associated with escapism, but the impact of romance on society can be observed. For instance, the relationship between literature and culture can be seen in the blurring of the social boundaries. The rise of the merchants and other lower status town dwellers brought material and monetary wealth, which gave the opportunity to afford expensive manuscripts and attend the flourishing universities (Winks and Ruiz 2005, 124). The production of English translations shows the demand for texts to cater for a wider

audience, as the nobility generally spoke Norman French throughout the middle ages. In view of this it can be assumed that the same people enjoying material wealth and gain would also be beginning to enjoy the pleasures of literature. The genre of romance in the medieval period is notable for its interest in the material environment. As a secular literary genre, the domestic elements within the texts, such as clothing, architecture and material possessions, are all described in such a way that suggests they are important as an area of interest. These elements, in a secular context, are part of the visual identification of social status which plays a key role in medieval romance. One explanation for the many rings and precious stones in the romances is their role as signifiers of material wealth. From its French origins, romance has provided sumptuous imagery of life in a royal court. The works of Chrétien and Marie de France are examples of literature which mirror the lives of the audiences, as well as providing an idealised lifestyle to aspire to. The extensive works of Chrétien de Troyes provided a foundation of Arthurian romance in European culture, “versions already subtle and sophisticated” of the stories of the Knights of the Round Table (Burrow 1982, 8). He was the pioneer in Arthurian literature, combining a series of motifs and episodes into extensive and carefully organised compositions (Schmolke-Hasselman 1998, 1). Chrétien inspired a wealth of imitations and adaptations in English, and his work can be recognised as source material in numerous English romances. This shows his strong influence on the genre - and the implications of French culture as a presence in England. Chrétien’s works have been noted for their interest in the connection between fiction and historical truth and also the Welsh and early-French origins of many of his tales (Sweeney 2000, 55). These factors make his literature highly influential to the forms and subsequent interpretations of later romance. The material content of romances such as Chrétien’s is only one feature of the genre. The romances convey the value systems that an aristocratic audience would wish to adhere to –

chivalry and courtly love as well as political and religious stability. English medieval romance reached its peak in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Arthurian texts became a prevalent genre in secular literature. Such texts continue the focus on material culture, and can be seen to reflect, or be the source of certain historical contexts. For example, Edward III founding the Order of the Garter in 1348 – an overtly propagandist attempt to glamorise his war against the King of France (Keen 1984, 184) - strongly reflects the powerful influences and trends in romance literature. Chronicles show that Edward was openly inspired by Arthurian romance in his founding of the Order, so much so that it was regarded as a continuation of the fellowship of the Knights of the Round Table, and that Edward resolved to rebuild Windsor due to its mythological status as the birthplace of the Round Table (Keen 1984, 191). The garter is recognisable as sharing symbolism with the girdle in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its unifying shape that can also be seen in the ring. The Round Table, too, shares the symbolism of unity and equality, as its shape reflects the nature of the fellowship of knights famously associated with it. Arthurian legend as a genre was evidently exploited in later medieval English culture, with the earls of Warwick and the Mortimers writing him into their genealogies (Vale 1999, 195) in attempts to create strong associations. Vale (1999, 196) states that Arthur's profile peaked when the chivalric ideals of his legend coincided with the political plans of the monarch, but it is also evident by the abundance of English versions of the texts that Arthurian literature reached beyond the highest levels of the aristocracy.

Magic is another major feature of the romance genre, and one that is highly relevant to this study. Therefore the role of magic in the literature needs to be identified and understood before any detailed interpretations can be proposed. The theme of magic in medieval romance

is complex and varied. J. E. Stevens (1973) makes the valuable distinction between “the experience of the supernatural and the encounter with the marvellous” in medieval romance. He argues that the everyday world can carry a meaning beyond the commonplace, while the most amazing of marvels can be unmoving in the hands of a “prosaic fiction-monger”. He further identifies three categories of the marvels encountered in romance: the purely mysterious, the strictly magical and the miraculous. The purely mysterious, as Stevens perceives it, is “unmotivated, unexplained and inexplicable”. The Storm-Stone in *Ywain and Gawain*, the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and talking animals fall into this category, as things that cannot be explained. The strictly magical – identified in anthropological terms by Stevens as “the marvellous controlled by man” – includes magic rings, swords and ointments, and ‘magicians’; magical people such as Merlin and Morgan le Fay. Finally, the miraculous – the marvellous controlled by God – miracles being “God’s magic, his supernatural interventions in the natural workings of the created world”. Stevens’ categories are an invaluable tool in approaching the tangled world of magic in the romances, helping to organise the marvels into elements which have very different contexts within their own genre. It is the strictly magical which concerns the rings – they are man-made objects with magical properties, and therefore controlled by man. But the magical stones are less easy to define; they are - in terms of medieval thought - part of God’s created world and therefore miraculous. But they are also mysterious – the Storm-Stone is inexplicable in its power.

Magical objects, as a general term, can be seen to include a wealth of unusual and mysterious things within Middle-English romance. Magic clothing – gloves in the Breton Lay *Sir Degaré*, a robe in *Emaré* and the ‘magic’ girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (which critics now argue is not magical at all); magical swords in *King Arthur and King*

Cornwall, *Bevis of Hampton* and Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, as well as the occurrence of Arthur's famed sword Excalibur in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* ; a magic harp in *Sir Orfeo*, the magic stones of *Ywain and Gawain* and *Floris and Blancheflour* – all these can be included in the term. However, by far the most commonly used 'magical' object, and arguably the most significant, is the magic ring. Different types of magic ring feature in numerous English romances, most importantly in *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *King Horn* and Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*. Non-magical rings occur in others, such as *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, but even here the symbolic meanings carry particular significance within the text. It is the interest in material culture and the preoccupation with magic that makes Middle-English romance the ideal genre for conducting an interdisciplinary study such as this. The content of the romances, particularly the interest in possessions and display of wealth, correlates with the historical evidence of these elements in the society of medieval England. Similarly, the use of magic, particularly in relation to the stones and rings, finds direct comparative elements with the historical record, as will be discussed later.

The lack of specific focus on the subject of magical rings and stones in romance is evident when the current academic work is examined. Many of the texts cited above have received limited critical attention, and in most cases the occurrences of the rings and stones have been barely mentioned in academic study. Critical studies of the topic of magic rings and stones in the romances are limited to brief discussion of their role in plot development – structural points that allow the protagonist to achieve the unachievable through the use of the object and its magical properties. Anne Wilson (1988) in a study of what she refers to as 'magical plots' in Arthurian romance, refers very little to the strictly magical in the texts,

instead observing the structural themes observed by various romances. Whilst her study is undoubtedly relevant to romance criticism in general – giving an interesting argument as to the complexities of magic in romance - the avoidance of the issue of magic as an element in itself, as opposed to a tool for structure is an example of how critics have skirted the purely magical elements of these texts. In terms of a study that focuses on magical objects, to state that the rings and stones are merely plot aids completely ignores the wider cultural implications of the objects, implications a contemporary audience would have recognised. Critics such as Wilson who have studied magical romance in this way have ignored some issues that may be culturally relevant when observed in the historical context of the texts. Such an approach discounts the fact that magic rings are used in a formulaic and traditional fashion, and not as random objects with magical properties ascribed to them. Why is a ring such a popular choice for a magical object? Why are there not more magic necklaces, amulets, garments, magic armour or magic weapons within the romances? While some of these things occur, they are in the minority compared to the number of magic rings. It is true that the ring is a unisex object, but there are numerous other objects that could be used. It is clear that the ring, in the medieval mind, is a more suitable object for magic. The prevalence of these rings, magical and non-magical, suggests a context that goes beyond their structural use in the plot.

It is therefore surprising that no significant study has been made of these rings in relation to their place in medieval culture. It is strikingly clear that the ring holds a strong symbolic meaning within the romances, whether magical or not. This strong symbolism should suggest to the modern reader that the ring was significant in the middle ages in a way that would make it more than just a useful means for a romance hero to achieve magical power.

A few critics have attempted to look at rings and stones as more than mere trinkets. Howard R. Patch, in his study of the *House of Fame*, looks at the symbolic significance of the magical stones in relation to evidence that Chaucer had studied the lapidaries and other treatises. As further study will reveal, there is substantial evidence for the influence of these documents on medieval literature. Patch's interpretation is a tentative example of an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, but fails to make any substantial conclusions on the relationship between the stones in the text and the stones of the lapidaries Chaucer is said to have studied. As previously cited, Jessica Cooke (1998) examines the significance of Lady Bertilak's ring in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She argues that the general interpretation of the ring as purely a symbol of greed and wealth fails to recognise the context of the ring in both the literary and social culture of its period. She asserts that the medieval audience would have had a much more complex and developed understanding of the ring and its function. Her approach is a promising recognition of the significance of rings in literature and culture, which most modern critics have overlooked due to a failure to recognise the multifaceted nature and manifold functions of the rings in the romances. However, as with Patch, Cooke fails to support her interpretation with evidence from the wider literary and social context.

P.J. Heather (1931) has made attempts to identify the precious stones in medieval romance by making direct comparisons to the lapidaries. The conclusions he draws are useful and illuminating, and he makes some interesting statements about what these shared beliefs in the lapidaries and literature show us about established beliefs. He perhaps comes closest to a detailed interdisciplinary study of precious stones in the medieval period, but he fails to make any detailed literary interpretations about the way the stones work within the poems, and also

fails to utilise much information from the wider historical and archaeological evidence. His purpose is to make an anthropological study of belief systems concerning precious stones in the medieval period, based on literary evidence, and therefore not a full interdisciplinary study that takes into account all spheres of evidence available. Furthermore, his reliance on the Anglo-Norman Lapidaries in his interpretations means that the study, while useful, is somewhat limited by its sources. Nevertheless, his extensive research proves useful and will be further referenced in the close readings.

Following an examination of romance criticism, the question remains - why has a detailed and focused interdisciplinary approach to these objects not been attempted? It is evident from even a superficial examination of the historical and literary sources that rings and magic stones both had complex and intricate meanings entangled in their use. In some cases their use overlaps – rings with stones fall in to a more complicated sphere of interpretation due to the merging of their meanings. It is clear that a study of these elements in history, and in the romances, would offer a further depth of understanding, not just in the use of rings and stones but in the implications of those uses on the wider contexts of material culture and medieval belief systems.

The role of magic in romance has already been discussed; however, to fully take an interdisciplinary approach to these magical objects it is essential to understand the cultural and social implications of magic in its medieval context, and more specifically how the term ‘magic’ is interpreted. The studies of magic in medieval Europe, as well as the studies of the cultural practices concerned with the use of jewellery, can help to illuminate how rings and stones are used in the Middle English romances. However, it is important to note that the

historical study of magic is fraught with difficulty. The immediate problem is the issue of the meaning of magic. The term itself draws numerous interpretations. From a modern perspective, the view of magic is clouded by years of distortion and change to the perceptions of magic. A good example is the popular modern idea of runes as fortune-telling ‘magic’ stones, as opposed to their true meaning as the old Germanic alphabet, the *futhork*. The use of the runes was originally practical, although some arguments state a certain ‘magical’ use in how and where they were inscribed. Some of the names have mythological origins – Ing and Tiw being immediate examples – and the mysterious qualities of rune-stones evoke the idea of magical power. It is the transmission of these elements, filtered through years of cultural development that has led to runes being used in neo-pagan and Wiccan practices of divination. The idea of magic has been popularised and stretched so that it is now a completely different concept to how it would have been understood by a medieval mind. The negative repercussions of the witch trials, the rise of illusionist ‘magic’ tricks and the evolution of the fairy tale into Disney films such as *The Sword in the Stone* – a modern take on Arthurian romance – have distorted the concept of magic to contain a much broader and less specific understanding. While this is not necessarily a negative evolution in terms of cultural development – on the contrary, it shows how history and culture can shape ideas for the future – it makes an academic approach to the medieval idea of magic a more challenging and controversial endeavour. It is perhaps due to this that there is a limited amount of criticism concerning medieval magic in either historical or literary academia; the minefield of modern perception makes a genuine study more difficult to achieve, and the topic is now apparently unfashionable. However, an interdisciplinary approach to magic, including both literary and historical sources, can allow a study of the topic without an excess of modern ideas clouding the interpretation. The historical evidence sheds light on the medieval concept

of magic, while a study of the literature of the period shows how those ideas translate in practice, into art and culture. The historical and archaeological record specific to the rings and stones will be examined in further detail, but initially an understanding of the development of magic up to and during the medieval period is essential in order to place these objects within an accurate context. Magic in medieval culture is a complicated concept to approach. The ambiguity of magic as an identifiable element, combined with the relative lack of unbiased primary sources on the subject, makes the study of medieval magic a broad yet problematic subject. Magic for the medieval mind originated in classical and Biblical scholarship. Greek, Roman and Arabic studies of various sciences – alchemy, astronomy, astrology, medicine and divination to name a selection – were considered to include inexplicable magical elements. The definitions of magic are complex even in a medieval approach. As Heather (1931, 254) has recognised, in the medieval mind there was not much separation between magical use and ordinary use of precious stones. This perhaps suggests a more educated, self-aware interpretation of the magic in the romances than the general folklore associated with everyday practice. The idea of magic as something so universally accepted cannot fail to influence an interpretation of its use in literature. While the temptation of a modern critic is cynically to brush aside the magical and marvellous in the romances with modern sensibilities, the context of a wide medieval belief in numerous forms of magic suggests that more can be gleaned from interpretation. While the magical in medieval romance undoubtedly served as a form of escapism and as part of the wider thematic nature of the genre, there is clearly more contextual meaning to the magical elements than first appears.

Studies of magic in medieval history are prevalent, but still not a highly popular area of research for academics. Richard Kieckhefer's inclusive study of magic in the Middle-Ages

provides a full historical background to the development of magic as a science, a controversial practice and most importantly, a widely used and understood element of everyday life across a broad social scale. His study is by far the most complete and straightforward approach to the topic, not allowing his study to descend too far into speculation and relying on the evidence presented in historical sources. His study is invaluable as an overview of magic in the Middle-Ages, but due to the vast area of study it does not include deep analysis of the magic rings and stones, or their context in literature. The conflict of magic and religion is a popular study, with the works of Keith Thomas (1971) and Eamon Duffy (1992) deserving particular mention for their extensive research on the decline of popular belief. Both centre their arguments on the impact of the Reformation and the following centuries, but have useful information on the history of magical belief that provides useful insight.

As we have found with romance, the academic study of magical rings and stones is severely lacking. The historical study of magical rings and stones is also a limited field – with no complete modern study specific to these objects being attempted. The abundance of ‘magical’ stones in the historical record would make this absence of any work specific to them inexplicable, were it not for the quality and validity of earlier studies. Magical stones have long been dominated by the studies of Joan Evans. Her researches into the lapidaries, including editions, as well as her examination of magical stones in medieval history, are useful areas of study. Whilst the symbolic meanings and implications of the use of the magic stones is not always a developed area, the study focuses on the historical record and is invaluable in that sense. Since Evans’ work, very limited research on the lapidaries and magic stones has been attempted.

Medieval rings as a specific area of research have received limited study, with the wider genre of medieval jewellery falling mostly into wider historical studies; such as David Hinton's *Gold and Gilt Pots and Pins* (2005), or broad histories of jewellery over thousands of years such as Claire Phillip's *Jewellery: From Antiquity to the Present* (1996). Only recently have significant studies focusing solely on medieval rings been conducted – most notably the work of Les Enluminures and their excellent study *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings* (2007), based on their own collections and the collections of other museums. The study is a useful catalogue of the fashions, styles and traditions in ring making and giving – providing an insight into the more personal uses of these objects. The research is incomplete, as they are still working towards a more comprehensive study. However the information on medieval rings, presented with excellent images, provides the best study in the subject to date, and the focus on the relationship between rings and medieval art highlights the fluidity of medieval culture – a factor that can be observed in literature also.

Medieval jewellery has received more study, particularly by John Cherry, who devoted a useful study on goldsmiths and their practices (1992). This however lacks the specificity that is needed for a detailed study on rings and stones. Whilst the objects naturally fall into his study categories, Cherry focuses his attention on the social and cultural history of goldsmith work in general, and lacks the depth of interpretation that would prove useful for a study such as this. The most lavish and comprehensive study of medieval jewellery to date is R. W. Lightbown's work *Medieval European Jewellery, with a Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1992). The catalogue forms an extremely useful and visually engaging study. Lightbown studies these objects with a strong interest in their cultural role in medieval society. His concise study of jewellery in medieval life – such as the

influence of sumptuary laws - as well as detailed commentary on the use and practices of magic stones, is accompanied by chapters devoted to each type of jewellery. However, notably missing is a chapter specifically focusing on medieval rings, an omission that leaves Lightbown's work slightly lacking for one wishing to concentrate on these socially important and symbolically relevant objects. In terms of literature, his study does not shed light on the role of jewellery in medieval romance, but rather provides a useful backbone of information about the complex use of jewellery in the contemporary social climate. Lightbown relies on many sources from Italy, France and Burgundy, but even for a study of English romance this can prove useful, as his and other studies have proved that jewellery fashions and traditions were fluidly shared throughout Europe in the medieval period. In all, Lightbown's work is an invaluable addition to the study of medieval rings and stones, whilst leaving room for more detailed analysis of their role.

In the field of medieval material culture, there have been some comprehensive and innovative studies in recent years. Of note is the work of David Hinton (2005), who has taken the material record of medieval possessions and utilised the studies of other disciplines to shed light on his own research, such as reading material culture in the literature of Chaucer and Langland. Hinton's study is useful as a means of reading cultural identity and opinion in the study of material objects – an approach that is highly relevant to a study such as this. Despite this, there is still scope for further study into the relationship between material culture and literature, particularly in relation to the magic rings and stones of the romances. The material record itself is a valuable resource in this study. We are fortunate to have a vast number and variety of medieval rings that have been recovered during excavation, as with the Fishpool Hoard, or passed down in private collections – such as that of Sir Hans Sloane,

founder of the British Museum, or of Les Enluminures in Paris. This wealth of original material not only shows that rings were numerous, but how they were made, used and the traditions they incorporated.

To fully understand the complex meanings behind these magical objects, it is essential to study the rituals, beliefs and practices that form their material histories. Rings have been used for over a thousand years in western European culture, with Roman and early medieval examples surviving in large numbers, and their popularity seems to have continued to grow throughout cultural use. They have long been dually associated with healing and the heart – with the tradition of the *læcefinger*, the leechfinger or healing finger (being the third finger used for wedding rings) and the belief in its strong pulse signifying a direct arterial route to the heart (Pollington 2000, 41). The meanings and interpretations of rings are manifold. The twelfth century intellectual development of the circular shape as fitting the geometrical theory of beauty, undisrupted by angles, as well as being ‘unbroken’ as a testimony of faith was highly influential (Hinton 2005, 191). The shape – a band that forms an infinite circle – represents constancy. Rings as marriage tokens are an ideal symbol, as they have many properties that enhance the symbolism of bonds and vows. As continuous bands, rings represent unity. The infinite symbol of a circular band conveys the ideas of constancy and eternity, such concepts that are united with the theme of love and faith. It is due to this powerful symbolism that rings have been used as visual representations of unions or bonds: secular, religious and amatory. In addition, the placement of a finger ring allows it to be constantly on display, to the extent that rings would sometimes be worn over gloves. This expression of material wealth shows the importance of rings as status symbols. These meanings will be discussed further – however it is important to state that rings in the medieval

period are more than just mere trinkets or objects of beauty. Modern perceptions and inflated materialism have caused rings to be viewed primarily as objects of adornment, with the exception of wedding bands. The deeper, more complex meanings attached to the symbol of the ring have mostly been forgotten, or at least they are not inherent in the use of rings. The medieval concept is far more intricate. Whilst they are undoubtedly designed to be beautiful and pleasing to the eye, the use of rings extends beyond the modern meanings.

The vast range of medieval rings in the archaeological record show a broad and varied use. There are examples of rings engraved with elaborate animal and Classical imagery, and numerous religious inscriptions, as well as signet rings for seals. Various specific styles and fashions can be identified. Stirrup rings, so named in the nineteenth century for their apparent resemblance to the shape of a horse's stirrup (Hindman 2007, 104), are often rings of office for bishops – so much so that the term is largely synonymous with bishop's rings (Ibid 102). These rings were often bezel set with precious stones, such as sapphires. Such rings are typically twelfth century gothic examples, reflecting the architecture of arches in gothic cathedrals (Phillips 1996, 56), rather than stirrups. This relationship between the architecture of ecclesiastical buildings and the stirrup ring as a bishop's symbol of office reflects a unity of art and meaning. Matthew Paris' *Liber Additamentorum* shows a record of a stirrup ring of around 1140, given by Eleanor of Aquitaine to her childhood friend Richard 'The Animal' – engraved with the initials "R" and "A" on either side of the bezel (Hindman 2007, 102). Tart Mold Rings are the second type of ring originating from the Gothic era. The ring is so named for its resemblance to a "tart mould" or "pie dish" – the bezel being shaped as such (Ibid 108). Again, this is an example of a misnomer, as the ring is more like to the shape of the "tallior", the uppermost part of a column in late Romanesque and Gothic architecture (Ibid 111). The

rings that we are concerned with in the romances are, in the vast majority, love rings in one form or another. That is to say, they are all meant to symbolise a bond or a connection, rather than as pure symbols of status. The tradition of rings as love tokens is an ancient and well established practice, even by the early medieval period. Pliny records an iron love ring being sent by a groom to his prospective bride. “Fede” rings date from late antiquity, and have clasped hands in repoussé or as a cameo on the base of the band (Hindman 2007, 136). The symbolism of hands clasped dates from the Roman tradition of concluding a marriage contract with a handshake (Ibid 136). The visual representation of the marriage contract shows the importance of imagery in the use of rings.

The studies of these numerous and varied rings are largely concerned with their manufacture, their symbolism of items of status and with trends in their design. Despite the unquestionable social importance of these rings, very few observers make the connection between their role in medieval life and their occurrence in medieval literature. The archaeologists as well as the literary critics fail to venture out from their own disciplines and study in detail the significance of the rings in relation to their other uses in medieval culture.

Stones also have a complex history of belief and use. The history of magical gemstones dates back to the Arabic, Greek and Roman periods of superior scientific knowledge and advancement. The study of stones and their properties derives from such ancient ‘science’, pioneered by such respected authorities as Pliny. Later authorities such as Isidore in the seventh century developed the genre into a well established and widely understood concept of belief – a part of the way the medieval mind understood what they interpreted as the power of nature and God. The interest in the subject seems to have

developed and continued to be a prevalent area of study and belief in the medieval period and into the Renaissance. Evidence of the study and belief in the magical properties of stones being regarded as an important and serious science can be seen in the way it is used alongside the other sciences of the period, such as astrology and astronomy. Gower's account of the twelve signs and the fifteen stars, along with their corresponding precious stones, is an excellent example of this (Heather 1931, 224). In terms of origin, precious stones were generally associated with the East – with exotic locations in Asia (Ibid 234). Hinton (2005, 187) states that the wonder of precious stones was due to their origins – emeralds from India and sapphires from Ceylon - or that they were considered natural phenomena, such as the fabled toadstone. It might well be that the mystery and marvellous that went hand-in-hand with the stories from such places enhanced the appeal and the magical perceptions of the stones. However, knowledge of use and inherent magical properties of stones was well established by the early medieval period in Western Europe, as the lapidaries show. Their power was not always linked to their origin.

Stones were clearly an attractive element in medieval culture, not only because of their exoticism, but also because of the magical properties associated with them in the lapidaries. As Lightbown (1992, 11) states, “In the medieval world the division between science and superstition was not so sharp as in ours, and stones worn as charms by the ignorant were endowed with medical or mystical properties by the learned.” . As with the wider concept of magic, the use of stones was tied up with deeply cemented cultural folklore, combined with the religious ideas of stones as marvels made by God. The use of precious stones was apparently widespread throughout material culture – in jewellery but also in the use of tableware, clothing and weaponry. Both Lightbown (1992) and Cherry (1992) provide records

and interpretation of this varied use, but it is the use of gems with rings that holds relevance to this study, as there is evidence to suggest that it is the stones set into rings that offered the magical powers of the rings in the romances. To understand their influence, it is necessary to study the texts that record the beliefs and perceived science of these objects – records that we are fortunate still to have access to.

The lapidaries developed over the centuries to include respected and much used medieval sources. Bishop Marbode of Rennes is widely credited as the main source for medieval lapidaries. His *Liber Lapidum* (also known as the *Liber de Lapidibus*, *Lapidarius* or the *Book of Stones*) was a treatise he composed between 1067 and 1081 (Evans 1933, xi), cataloguing the various powers and properties of stones, drawn from his knowledge and research of earlier sources. Marbode was a worldly bishop, composing poetry, sometimes even of an erotic nature. The *Liber Lapidum* is a poem also, describing at length the properties of sixty stones. It is perhaps the form of the text that made it so popular and widely read – as a poem it would appeal to broader audiences than the scientists and intellectuals – and his style clearly derived more from flourishing literature rather than stoic catalogues of science. This blending of science and intellectual subjects with the entertainment of the laity shows how educated many of the audiences of the romances would have been. Marbode's work was reproduced in numerous copies, and later committed to print – fourteen editions were made, the first dated to 1511. He used Isidore's *Etymologiae* as his primary source, an encyclopaedia dating from the seventh century. Isidore's Book XVI of his master work catalogued details *de lapidibus et metallis* – of stones and metals – itself derived from the earlier works of Pliny. This clear recycling and transference of learning regarding the stones shows how long-standing and relevant the study was. For Marbode's work to be so extensively read, reproduced and used as a source for later texts, the desire to learn about gems and their

properties must have been a vibrant and engaging subject for its audience. In the context of this study, the lapidaries are highly important as they show the established traditions and beliefs associated with stones, while showing the longevity and popularity of the subject. The specific analysis of each stone can also shed light on the stones in the romances, and is therefore useful in the close readings of the romances in Part II.

Looking at the material and documentary records, we are able to shed more light on the uses and beliefs that bind the precious stones. An important distinction needs to be made as to the types of precious stones and their corresponding properties. From studying the lapidaries, it becomes glaringly obvious that there are numerous virtues of precious stones that have no place in the romances. In fact, the lapidaries show a vast number of properties in relation to the relative few that occur in the romances. The explanation for the apparently limited field of magic stones in the literature is relatively simple – romance is a genre that does not associate itself with everyday life. The marvellous context of the romances means that many of the more mundane properties associated with stones has no place in the narrative. For example, there are numerous stones in the lapidaries that are said to provide help with agriculture. Similarly, childbirth is a common theme, with several stones being claimed as aids in that field (Heather 1931, 263). Children, of course, are rarely involved in romance. As has been shown, the magic stones in the romances concern themselves with influencing the hero in his various adventures – the ‘practical’ virtues in that case being protection from injury and imprisonment, means of avoiding imprisonment, healing and prowess in battle. These are all virtues that adhere to the themes of chivalry and knightly behaviour that are so important to the romance genre. To look at the cultural perspective, these properties of the magic stones would have struck a chord with an aspirational audience,

particularly the knighted gentry who associated themselves with the romance lifestyle. But the lapidaries show that the belief in the power or magic stones extended beyond the realm of romance literature, and into the practicalities of daily life. The social implications of the less aristocratic powers, associated with the working life of a peasant, would nevertheless be recognisable and have an impact on those higher up the social scale. A lord would understand the virtue of a stone that would guarantee him a good crop. Similarly, a peasant would appreciate the virtue of a stone that would allow healing or protection, as such things would not only be of use to a knight in battle. In this way, the lapidaries show an audience that transcends the social scale – a general record of virtuous stones that could be used by anybody. It is therefore quite clear that the limited virtues of the stones in the romances are related to the fantasy world of the romance, and not to the relative knowledge or interest of the audience.

The element that restricts the possession and use of rings and stones is the issue of price. Precious stones are just that – precious – and therefore not necessarily commercially attainable for all levels of social order. There is evidence that in some cases, precious stones could have been possessed by the less wealthy. For instance, the grocer Richard de Preston donated a sapphire with the virtue of curing ailments of the eyes to St. Paul's at London (Kieckhefer 2000, 102). However, the archaeological and historical record shows that in general, the possession of precious stones and rings was relative to wealth. The majority of historical references to magic rings and stones come from treasuries of noble or royal subjects, or chronicles referring to the wealthy and prosperous (Ibid 102). Of course, the historical bias of written material towards those higher up the social scale is acknowledged, and may explain why references to less wealthy people such as the grocer are few and far

between. However, it seems practical that those with more money could afford to buy more luxurious and exotic items and those who had not the means would have to content themselves with what they could afford.

In terms of social status, rings served the important purpose of display. The placing of a finger-ring allows the ostentatious display of wealth that was becoming so significant during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Jewellery, unlike clothing, had little practical function, and therefore was a more excessive and luxury commodity. Wedding bands and rings of state had symbolic functions, and brooches were used to secure cloaks, but in general jewellery had little practical use. As general wealth and social prestige increased during the fourteenth century, the rise of rich merchants through flourishing foreign trade and the increased wealth and freedom of the peasants brought on by the population decrease following the Black Death caused a blending of the social order and the loss of the clear distinctions of the three estates – nobles, clergy and the peasantry. This shows a strong degree of aspirational intention in the lower social classes – a desire to have the visible wealth and trappings of their superiors. Rings became more widespread among the merchant and even peasant material culture, albeit often with base metals and imitation glass or paste beads rather than the noble materials of gold and precious ‘magical’ stones. Base-metal finger-rings had glass studs or pastes set in them in imitation of proper gems, just as many were gilded to make them look at first glance like gold (Hinton 2005, 199). The ring became a less powerful symbol of wealth and status with these social changes, and the desire to counteract the disruption of social level was made apparent with the Sumptuary Laws, such as the law of 1363 which explicitly implied the threat of dressing above one’s rank to the social order of England (Hinton 2005, 217). Measures were put in place across Europe to prevent the production of false gems, to the

extent that almost all medieval guild statutes for goldsmiths either forbid or regulate the use of false stones in jewellery, more especially in rings (Lightbown 1992, 17). However, these regulations seem to have had little effect, as there is evidence that false stones were widely used throughout the continent (Lightbown 1992, 20). It seems that the desire to indulge those aspiring to a higher social level was stronger than the fear of punishment. Such was the influence of material culture in the medieval period. All levels of society, excluding the very poorest, can be seen to wear jewellery by the mid-thirteenth century (Hinton 2005, 203). This suggests that perhaps the wearers of such items were less concerned with the supposed properties of the stones than they were with the power of display. It has also been remarked that stones with healing properties do not feature in the historical record as being widely used in medicine – certainly not as much as they might, or as much as the use of herbs (Heather 1031, 249). The interpretation of this can be approached in two ways – that the stones were not believed to be as generally effective as herbs, or that precious stones were simply not as attainable. The argument that the stones were not considered as effective as herbs has some weight, particularly as many herbs do have actual properties that are proven to aid various ailments, in a manner that holds up in modern medicine. Having stated that, there are records of stones being used and donated for the purpose of healing, as with the case of Robert de Preston previously mentioned. These historical examples show a degree of serious belief in the medicinal properties of the stones that goes beyond folklore or myth.

Taking this into account alongside the wealth of lapidary evidence suggests a firm and established belief in the power of stones. It seems clear that there is a more practical reason for the limited records of stones as healing. The issue of wealth then, is a viable explanation for this absence. The donation of stones with magical properties to the church is an interesting

point also, as it shows that the stones were taken seriously in this manner by the clergy, and were not just the fodder of popular opinion. The issue of how magic was perceived comes into question, too, as the line between ‘acceptable’ magic and necromancy was fluid and highly subjective. The widespread and popular use of the lapidaries is enough evidence to suggest that magic rings and stones did not fall into the category of dangerous magic. Kieckhefer (2000, 9) argues that there was a distinction that allowed magic to co-exist with religion in medieval society:

Broadly speaking, intellectuals in medieval Europe recognised two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was a science that dealt with ‘occult virtues’ (or hidden powers) within nature.

Demonic magic could be seen as a perversion of religion towards demons, and such magic was obviously not tolerated by the church. Therefore, it is important to note that in the majority of cases records of magic rings and stones in the literary and historical records tend to concern themselves with what might be described as ‘white magic’ (Heather 1931, 253). Such a term is loaded in a modern context, but is useful in distinguishing the medieval concepts of acceptable, natural magic and necromancy. The lapidaries show positive effects in almost every case – virtues that aid the user or provide a helpful outcome. There is an absence of examples in which the stones are being used to cause harm to another (at least not directly), and the explanation for this is not surprising. While it is highly likely that the negative effects of certain stones were known, the publication or public demonstration of such powers would undoubtedly expose the user to the danger of heresy, particularly in the eyes of the church, which was keen to suppress any kind of competing beliefs (Kieckhefer 2000, 39).

The sapphire presents itself as a popular stone in both the archaeological and the historical records, indeed, Lightbown (1992, 11) states that it, along with the emerald, ruby and diamond, was one of the four ‘essential’ stones. When the lapidary evidence is taken into account, it is clear why they were coveted. The sapphire also has symbolic interpretations that make it an attractive choice. The colour was associated with heaven due to its sky colour (Hinton 2005, 187), and also with the colour of the Virgin Mary. However, the romances fail to represent the sapphire with the same magnitude. While stones are not always specifically identified, the absence of reference to the sapphire could be attributed to the fact that the sapphire was often associated with bishops.

The magic rings in the English romances are not usually described in great physical detail, as we shall see in further examination. The superficial purpose of their use is to allow the protagonist to embark on adventures and achieve feats of heroism that would be outside the realm of human possibility. The power of the rings is often akin to invincibility, and so the knight wearing the ring has the ability to overcome seemingly impossible obstacles without the scepticism of the audience tainting his achievements. It is precisely this interpretation of the magic rings that most critics reach, and conclude with. They rarely look beyond this function, unless it is to analyse their place in the structure of the poem – in some romances the use of the ring is integral to the wider structure of the plot and therefore a literary tool for the poet. Such examples will be explored later in this study – for now it suffices to say that many critics have failed to read further into their role and symbolism in the romances.

Whilst the lapidaries can shed a great deal of light on the academic and scientific ideas of magical gems, they give a limited amount of information about how widely they were read

and understood, and how their knowledge translated into medieval life. However, there is clear evidence in the historical record of magical rings and jewels, found in the practice of English law. Records show several instances where magical rings are involved in a sense that goes beyond romantic ideas and superstition. In 1220, one Philip de Albin made a claim against Alice de Lundreford, who he accused of retaining three gold rings set with sapphires after he lent them to her to help with her sickness (Evans 1922, 112). In his *Historia Major*, Matthew Paris records the indictment of Hubert de Burgh in 1232, in which one of the counts was that he had removed a gem from the royal treasury which made the wearer invincible in battle, and had given it to his sovereign's enemy, Llewellyn of Wales (Evans 1922). Chronicles show yet more evidence of a widespread and deeply held belief in the magical properties of stones and rings, such as stones set into the table-plate as a means of detecting poison, as recorded in the 1380 inventory of Charles V's treasury (Evans 1922, 115). Such inventories also shed light not only on the kinds of gems that were seen to have magical properties, but on the kind of people that possessed them. The majority of surviving inventories record the possessions and assets of wealthy or noble owners.

With the historical evidence in mind, a reading of the rings and stones in the romances becomes far more significant. It can be assumed that the same audiences who enjoyed the romances were the same courtly audiences who took interest in the popular lapidaries. Taking into account the current scholarship in both the literary and historical disciplines, it is clear that such a new approach can be made – the thorough study of magical rings and stones in the Middle-English romances in relation to the historical culture of their context, assessing perceptions and understandings of the objects themselves, their representations and how these aspects reflect on the literature of the period. In reading the literature in terms of material

culture, a new and complex interpretation can be drawn from the existence of these magical objects in the texts, and the deeper meanings they bring.

Part II

In order to effectively apply the historical evidence of magical rings and stones in relation to romance the process of close reading is an essential step. Full understanding of the way these objects are used in the literature will allow an interpretation that takes into account the cultural and social context, when compared with the extensive historical and material evidence. In this way, the material culture of medieval England can shed light on the importance of rings and stones in the romances – their function, context and greater significance. This section will focus on this close reading, as well as discussion of the wider issues concerning these objects within the literature.

The general observation on magical rings and stones in the romances is that they provide useful structural tools. Many critics have recognised their use as tools for allowing the story and the protagonist to advance, often through unrealistic or supernatural feats, in order to enhance the moralistic and symbolic messages of the texts. This theory is undeniably an accurate observation of the way these magical objects function within the romances, but there are clearly more interpretations to be gleaned from their use considering the complex cultural history of the objects.

Rings and stones in the romances do not strike the audience as overly significant to the texts in as whole. In the majority of cases, they are briefly described or referred to and then swiftly forgotten in the flow of the narrative. It is this lack of interest, it seems, that has caused critics to generally overlook them. The major focus of the close readings will be on the magic rings of the romances – and in many cases, their magical stones. This is due to the fact that Arthurian romance shows a bias towards these particular magical objects, and they are yet

to be fully addressed in an interdisciplinary study. However, there are some interesting examples of the power of magic stones in medieval romance that do not fit into this category, and therefore they will be addressed first and separately. Although not always recognised as significant, there is an abundance of evidence of magic stones, independent of the rings, in medieval romance and medieval material culture. Perhaps the feature that makes them unremarkable is the fact that the majority of these examples are not explicitly 'magical'. The theory that to a modern reader the references to precious stones that are prevalent in literary description can be interpreted merely as examples of the medieval preoccupation with visual wealth falls short when the texts are examined closely. The medieval lapidaries show that the stones were viewed in a more complex way, and almost every stone mentioned in medieval literature has certain properties or virtues that would now be interpreted as magical, but in the medieval period may have been accepted as natural science. With the context of the lapidary evidence, the descriptions of precious stones in the romances take on a deeper meaning.

The storm-stone in *Ywain and Gawain* falls into Steven's (1973) category of the "purely mysterious". However, it is not so mysterious in its function within the romance. The stone fulfils an essential role in part of the ritual that is repeated several times in the tale, each time allowing a meeting with its guardian and a subsequent feat of arms. Some contextual explanation of the way the stone functions is necessary in order to fully understand this role. The stone lies in a well or spring next to a chapel and a beautiful tree, and when water is poured upon it, a storm rises up to barrage the performer of the ritual with thunder and lightning, wind, rain and hail. Following the violence of the storm, the nearby tree is filled with birds singing a beautiful and enchanting song, and the display is concluded with the violent attack of the guardian of the well – which in each case is the knight bound to

Alundyne (as the well is her property and is apparently in need of a protector). Steven's categorising of the stone as purely mysterious suggests that it has no explanation of its existence or its purpose. In the interior context of the romance itself, it is just that – the stone exists in the story without a history or a reason, apart from its practical function as the means of rousing the attack of the defending knight, and therefore being the means of providing adventure for questing knights at various points in the narrative. However, in the wider exterior context of the influences on medieval culture, the stone is not so mysterious.

Belief in rain-making stones can be traced to Roman sources. Sir James Frazer's nineteenth-century publication, *The Golden Bough* (1993), identifies numerous sources of beliefs and practices concerning rain-making stones. He states that "stones are often supposed to possess the property of bringing on rain, provided they be dipped in water or sprinkled with it, or treated in some other appropriate manner". His overwhelming list of exotic examples from the Antipodes and Africa, while not directly applicable to a student of European literature, shows a standard tradition of belief in the power of stones that transcends the study of lapidaries. Numerous Asian and European examples have been identified concerning beliefs in the power of storm-making springs (Hamilton 1911). The international existence of this belief can be argued to be influenced in some ways by anthropological belief systems, based on the wider theories such as those outlined by Anne Wilson (1988). There have also been attempts logically and scientifically to identify the causes of this belief in relation to the correlation of the locations of historically recorded storm-making springs with the geographical existence of hot springs and volcanic activity (Hamilton 1911). Such natural phenomena would undoubtedly have a magical look to a community unfamiliar with volcanic

science, and so it would only take one instance of a ritual performed seemingly provoking a 'magical' reaction to base a local myth.

A more definite theory that relates to the study of medieval belief is the transference of myths and legends caused by the international travel of crusaders. Stories of exotic legends were recorded and retold upon return, and clearly had an influence on the medieval writers. The fact that many precious stones were believed to have been derived from Asia and other exotic locations shows how travel influenced the transference of belief. However, it seems that the Storm-Stone of *Ywain and Gawain* has its roots in influences closer to home. Frazer's (1993) discussion of the European examples of rain-making stones have more direct relevance in studying the belief behind the stone in Arthurian romance. Frazer (1993) approaches the myth of the fountain of Barenton in a wistful manner that perhaps lacks historical integrity when viewed from the perspective of modern criticism, but his information on the myth itself proves useful to one wishing to interpret the storm-stone of Alundyne's well. The practice of throwing water on a stone slab is shown to have a cultural context in European thought, and is further supported by examples from Welsh sources. Frazer identifies these stones as being viewed as divine, and cites the practice of dipping a cross in the fountain of Barenton as a Christianized version of the pagan practice of throwing water on the stone. Such a view puts a new perspective on the well in *Ywain and Gawain* with its nearby chapel, bringing to mind the established practice of early Christianity in Europe of placing churches and chapels on the sites of pagan worship in attempts to smooth the conversion by merging the belief systems.

While Frazer's study sheds light on the history of the belief of rain-making stones, the tree, the singing birds and the defending knight are yet unexplained. To understand these

elements of *Ywain and Gawain*, a study of the sources of the tale is necessary. While Ywain and Gawain is clearly a close rendering of Chretien de Troyes' *Yvain* into English, the influence of Irish and other Celtic sources is evident particularly in a comparison with the later text *In Gillar Decair* and the close Welsh example in the Mabinogion. Studies of the various incarnations of this story have shown that the original source was likely to be of Celtic or Anglo-Norman origin, now lost (Cook 1907). It is worth noting that the stones of the Fountain of Barenton and the Welsh and Irish texts identify a stone slab, rather than a precious stone. It is this that makes the magical Storm-Stone in the English text different. The stone in *Ywain and Gawain*, according to Colgrevice's experience, is an emerald, set upon four rubies (lines 341 - 343). The lapidaries do not provide much help in interpreting the power of the emerald as it is perceived here – in fact, the emerald has been found to disperse tempests (*Sloane Lapidary III*, Evans 1933, 121) rather than incite them. However, the specific properties of the emerald may not have much bearing on the effect that is produced. In *Ywain and Gawain*, the text suggests that it is the ritual of pouring the water on the stone and its context within the well that provides its power, rather than any specific virtue in the stone itself:

By the well standes a stane:
Tak the bacyn sone onane
And cast on water with thi hand,
And sone thou sal se new thithand!

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 333 – 336)

Colgrevice's tale of his encounter with the stone is the only account that refers its specific nature – all the other accounts refer directly to the ritual of casting water on the stone, and not the stone itself. Colgrevice's description also seems merely to take into account the beauty

and richness of the stone, and remarks on the pleasant joyful feeling such a sight inspired in him.

An amerawd was the stane
(Richer saw I never nane)
On fowre rubyes on heght standand:
Thaire light lasted over al the land.
And when I saw that semely sight,
It made me bath joyful and lyght.

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 341 – 346)

This is in itself a recognisable formula in relation to precious stones in the romances. The idea of stones (particularly rubies) as shining with their own light has been much discussed by Heather (1931, 242) and has also been commented upon in relation to the ring in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Cooke (Cooke 1998). The concept of a knight taking joy in richness and beauty is a theme in romance, and so his remarks regarding the emerald and rubies seem to be motivated more by an admiration of wealth and splendour at this stage, rather than the marvel of the magical properties of the stones. This is an interesting point – it suggests that the ritual involving the precious stones has more bearing on its power than its own inherent virtues. The wonder of the storm-stone and its well is tied up in the ritual concerning it – the particular nature of the stone seems, in this case, to be as irrelevant as the water itself. It is apparently the combination of these two elements that results in the magical marvel.

Alternatively, the inclusion of the precious stone in the version in *Ywain and Gawain* may be an interesting example of the poet's influence on the tale. As further study of other romance indicates, the descriptions of precious stones follow something of a traditional use, and it may be that the poet is here blending the rain-making traditions with those of the beliefs of precious stones, or himself suggesting that the stone in the well is magical because of its

status as a precious stone. The poem's later date suggests that exposure to earlier examples of precious stones in English romance is likely, if not definite, and the poet is using his own knowledge about the influence of precious stones as a magical element. In this way, the actual powers of the precious stones are not directly relevant to the effect created by the ritual, but provide a good example of how recognisable the traditions of precious stones would be to an English audience.

With this unusual example of a magical stone addressed, it is now possible to look at the broader tradition of magical rings in the romances. Historical records of magic rings show a wide range of properties and virtues. These powers are almost always attributed to the stone or stones set in the ring, to the extent that if the stone is not specifically mentioned, it is still likely that the ring's magical properties are bound to a stone rather than the ring itself. This will be illustrated in the more developed close readings of the texts, but first it is important to address the various powers demonstrated by magic rings in the romances, in order to understand the cultural interpretations. The magic rings in the romances show a number of magical powers. In *Ywain and Gawain*, the ring that Lunet lends to Ywain has the power to conceal him from the searching guards, which perhaps for a modern reader conjures the idea of a ring of invisibility. Historical evidence supports the existence of a belief in the power of invisibility, with the Munich Handbook, a Latin catalogue of demonic magic, giving instructions as well as examples of invisibility in use (Kieckhefer 2000, 6-8). However, the text suggests a more subtle effect:

Als the bark hilles the tre,
Right so sal my ring do the.
Whan thou in hand has the stane,
Dere sal thai do the nane;

For the stane es of swilk might,
Of the sal men have na sight.

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 741 – 746)

The natural reference gives almost a hint of camouflage, but it seems that the ring literally provides a magical cloak or cover for Ywain, as the text states - much like the bark covers the tree. The demonic nature of the historical evidence for invisibility is interesting, as it suggests that the belief existed in this diluted form in romance without arousing heretical accusations. This shows how magical belief could be used in a Christian context. Classical literature shows evidence of a long established tradition of rings of invisibility, based on Plato's notorious Ring of Gyges – a ring that, when the bezel was turned inwards towards the palm, would confer invisibility on the wearer. Gyges uses the ring for the negative purposes of rape and murder (de Sainte-Maure 2000, 63). However, the power of stones shows that invisibility was not confined to demonic and heretical practice. The text specifically indicates that the stone is the source of the power, and such stones are not confined to the world of romance. The lapidaries show record of stones that can have the power to conceal. Agate is a stone that was considered to have the power to conceal a man. Heather (1931) identifies Achates as a stone with such a power in the Anglo-Norman Lapidaries as well as Hyacinthus, which he directly attributes as a possible stone for Lunet's ring (Heather 1931, 230). The *London Lapidary* (Evans 1933) also records an invisibility ritual concerning Agate:

We fynde in redynge þat ther is an acchate þat who-so putteth hit in
an herbe þat is cleped þe goulde, and putteth hit in his fyst cloos, no
man may se hym as þe boke seithe.

Whilst no herbs are mentioned in the nature of Lunet's ring, the idea of holding the stone in the hand is reflected in the linguistic elements of the description – whan thou *in* hand has the

stane. In fact, Lunet does not suggest that Ywain must wear the ring to have the effect; rather he must hold the stone in his hand. The Sloane Lapidary further supports this, with the entry for Acate stating that “the men that holdeth him close in his fist he shall be invisible” (Evans 1933, 129). It seems that in the case of Lunet’s ring the ring itself is merely the vessel for the magical stone, and the wearing of the ring is not the element that conveys its power. In addition, the evidence suggests that Lunet’s ring holds an agate stone, although the specific identification of the stone does not add much to an interpretation of its use and function – rather it shows the influence of the lapidaries and belief in magical stones on the romances.

More unusual magical powers evident in the romances can be seen in the rings of *Bevis of Hampton*. Josian’s ring has the power to protect her from the will of a man:

Ichave," she seide, "a ring on,
That of swiche vertu is the ston:
While ichave on that ilche ring,
To me schel no man have welling

(*Bevis of Hampton*, lines 469 - 472)

In arguably the most unconvincing of magical ring use, Josian declares that she will wear it out of love for Bevis, to prevent the husband of her forced marriage from being able to lie with her. The concept of a ‘chastity ring’ that magically prevents sexual acts is somewhat unusual, but such powers are not unrepresented in the lapidaries. Diamond, for example, is known to destroy lechery (*Sloane Lapidary I*, Evans 1933, 120), as does emerald (*London Lapidary III*, Evans 1933, 20). Whilst these powers do not have the specificity of Josian’s stone, it is not too far a leap to state that her stone has the power of preventing lechery. For, although she is married and her husband has rights to her, the rules of love in romance show loyalty to the true love – not necessarily the husband. Guinevere and Lancelot are not

condemned by the author for the sin of adultery in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* text because their love conforms to the romance ideal – and therefore a stone such as Josian's could be an adapted version of these lechery-preventing stones, protecting her from the will of her husband in favour of her true love Bevis. This adds weight to the theory that lapidary law was loosely used in the romances for the magical rings – believable because such rings were known to exist, but not specific in their science.

In Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, the magic ring presented to Canacee by the mysterious knight (a bringer of four magic gifts also including a horse, mirror and sword) has the dual powers of allowing her to understand the speech of birds and giving her knowledge of the healing powers of herbs:

“The vertu of the ryng, if ye wol heere,
Is this: that if hire lust it for to were
Upon hir thombe or in hir purs it bere,
Ther is no fowel that fleeth under the hevene
That she ne shal wel understonde his stevene,
And knowe his menyng openly and pleyn,
And answeere hym in his langage ageyn;
And every gras that groweth upon roote
She shal eek knowe, and whom it wol do boote,
Al be his woundes never so depe and
wyde.

(*The Squire's Tale*, lines 146 – 155)

Chaucer's magical ring is nothing if not an informed creation. The power of speech with birds is not a widely recognised property of any precious stone, but fulfils Chaucer's literary purpose in allowing Canacee to converse with the falcon – and therefore allowing Chaucer to make his wider satirical comments about the nature of love and faithfulness in romance through the falcon's allegorical tale. Chaucer's magic ring is therefore less influenced by the

learning of his contemporaries and more by the way magic rings can be used to further the plot or use unrealistic events to convey meaning. Whether Chaucer used the ring in this way in a satire of the other romance writers (who often use magic rings for this purpose) or for his own ends in the same way is unclear, although one would be inclined to assume the former. The power of healing attributed to the ring is used in the same way, as it eventually allows Canacee to heal the wounded falcon.

In terms of the historical context, the unusual power of speech with birds does not seem to be an example of an actual perceived virtue of a stone. Unlike the majority of the other powers exhibited by stones in the romances, the desire to speak with birds does not hold a strong practical draw for medieval society. This may be recognised as a satirical approach to the theme of magical objects and in addition, Chaucer's use of the bird does fit into the wider cultural context of courtly love literature. Birds are used allegorically in medieval literature, and specifically by Chaucer in his *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, as a means of providing insightful meanings about love courtship. Birds seem to fit well into this allegorical usage as they practice ostentatious mating rituals and while some mate for life, others are less constant. These features make them a good example of cynical reflection of the perceived rules and practices of courtly love. In this way, Chaucer's ring with the power of speech with birds shows a recognisable and familiar allegory, but made more complex by the intertwining theme of magical rings.

With these more unusual examples addressed, the majority of the remaining magic rings in the romances associate themselves with practically useful powers. Practical virtues associated with stones are prevalent in both the historical and literary record. By far the most

common property associated with the rings in the romances is the power of protection, in one form or another. The theme of magical rings for invincibility and healing can be seen throughout the romance genre and in the historical record. The ring of protection takes on various forms. In *Ywain and Gawain*, Alundyne's ring promises immunity from harm:

I sal tel to yow onane
The vertu that es in the stane:
It es na preson yow sal halde,
Al if yowre fase be manyfalde;
With sekenes sal ye nocht be tane,
Ne of yowre blode ye sal lese nane;
In batel tane sal ye nocht be,
Whils ye have it and thinkes on me;

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 1531 – 1538)

In *Sir Perceval of Galles*, the ring of the Sleeping Lady has a similar power:

Siche a virtue es in the stane,
In alle this werlde wote I nane
Siche stone in a ryng;
A man that had it in were
One his body for to bere,
There scholde no dyntys hym dere,
Ne to the dethe bryng.

(*Sir Perceval of Galles*, lines 1858 – 1864)

In *King Horn*, Rymenhild's ring offers protection from injury in battle:

The stones beoth of suche grace
That thu ne schalt in none place
Of none duntis beon ofdrad,
Ne on bataille beon amad,

(*King Horn*, lines 575 – 578)

The historical record provides further example of rings of protection. The lapidaries show numerous examples of stones that provide protection or prowess in conflict. Jasper has properties which “kepeth a man fro his adversaire” (*London Lapidary*, Evans 1933, 23). Chalcedony, if shown to an adversary, will help a man to win his cause (*London Lapidary XV*, Evans 1933, 30). Balas “defendeth contention and strifes; if a man beare it on him among his enemies they shall haue no power to hurt him” (*Sloane Lapidary X*, Evans 1933, 123). This element of magical power seems to have been the most sought after and desired property for a magic ring or stone, and the reasons for this seem practical. A person in an unstable political situation, or who has reason to fear death, would be grateful for a protective talisman.

Whether or not the belief was founded on adamant faith in the virtue of the stone, superstition or merely the desire for it to have power is difficult to determine, and highly dependent on the person in question and their circumstances. It can be safely assumed, however, that some people took their belief in the power of the stones very seriously. Such fervent belief can be observed in descriptions of stones with certain powers, particularly those that would reassure those who needed it. For instance, the detection of poison is a virtue of magic stones that was taken seriously by many in the medieval period, particularly those in power. As with the protective stones, the status of the belief is dependent on the circumstances of the possessor. Poison-detecting stones are evident in the chronicles. King John suspected that his pears had been poisoned due to the fact that the precious stones he was wearing were seen to sweat – a property attributed to many stones in the lapidaries (Evans 1933, 114). A man in such a precarious social and political position would naturally fear poison, and it can be argued that a less vulnerable person might not hold such a strong belief in a stone’s power. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the belief in stones with this magical property was widespread and

widely accepted. Another man of power over a hundred years later, the Duke of Burgundy, has in his inventory of 1408 a ring that can detect poison.

The power of healing can be observed in many stones listed in the lapidaries. Stones with cures for various diseases are more prevalent, no doubt due to medieval medicine being for the most part a home practice. This is likely to be due to the desire for cures rather than proven medical fact. In the romances, such stones have little representation, as disease is less of a concern to the romance hero than the healing of wounds. Stones that would heal wounds would be more suited for the genre, for instance Cornellyn (Corneolus), when worn on the finger or around the neck, “sal staunche blod on what lym it be” (*North Midland Lapidary*, Evans 1933, 53). Heather identifies over forty other examples of stones said to restore or maintain bodily health, including heliotropium and coraliium (Heather 1931, 247). Such a stone would be an invaluable commodity for a knight embarking on dangerous quests – either within a romance or inspired by one - but also a precious magical object for the average medieval person wishing to prolong their life.

Despite the majority of the magic rings having specifically magical stones, there are occasions where no stone is mentioned. Garcy’s ring in *Bevis of Hampton* is simply described as his *goldryng* (2299) with no mention of a stone. The properties of the ring suggest the tradition of a ‘seeing stone’ and yet no stone is mentioned. There are elements in the text that suggest the ring could easily have had a magic stone – the reference to the ring is brief and its moment of relevance to the plot is fleeting which may explain why no greater detail of the ring is mentioned. An informed audience familiar with the established tradition of rings with magic stones would likely assume that the ring had a stone, due to the contextual knowledge

of other romances and possibly the lapidaries. Certainly they would have had some understanding of the folklore about magical rings. However, just as the ring can be assumed to have held a magic stone, giving the ring its virtue, the lack of reference may just as easily be an example of a ring without a stone, but still magical in its own right. The gold itself can be interpreted as having important alchemical powers, but Garcy's ring is nevertheless an exception to the rule.

The varied and sometimes bizarre examples of magical rings and stones in the romances reflect and are illuminated by the material and archaeological evidence as well as the extensive historical record. However, it remains that essentially the magic rings and stones in the romances have a primary function – to allow the narrative of the text to pass from the realistic world into the unrealistic. This function is tied up with the concept of a believable or viable plot. The magical property of the stone or ring allows the protagonist to engage in acts or deeds that, in a realistic context, would be completely unbelievable to an intelligent audience. For instance, the power of invincibility inherent in many of the magical rings allows the hero to fight against impossible circumstances without the credibility of the tale being called into question by a sceptical audience. Such an example can be seen in *Ywain and Gawain* – Alundyne's magical ring is bestowed upon Ywain so that he will be protected and therefore able to return to her within a year. The trials he faces within that year are no challenge because of the power of the ring, and therefore credible. His failure to return is subsequently due to a lack of faith towards her, rather than the hindrance of regular human obstacles. In *Bevis of Hampton*, Josian's ring makes it possible for her to keep faith with Bevis and not submit to the sexual will of her husband. Without the magic ring, it would be highly inconceivable that Josian would be able to prevent her husband from lying with her –

both the law and the presumed physical strength of her husband would mean that she would be largely powerless to prevent the consummation of the marriage. The ring provides the answer, giving her the means to keep herself virginal and faithful for her true love. In some ways, this theory is ambiguous. Romance is a genre where the reality of everyday life is suspended in order to allow a degree of escapist enjoyment, whilst real morals and messages are didactically conveyed, albeit subtly. Such a genre would probably not be approached with a sceptical eye for stark realism. However, the context of a fantasy world does not negate the need for a plot that can be believed, and it is the use of the magical objects that allows the realism and credibility within the unreal romantic world.

The literary record shows that certain linguistic patterns were used to describe the magical rings and their stones. In the romances, the stones themselves are not always directly described or identified, but there are numerous examples where the ring's power is specifically attributed to the stone. In *King Horn*, the ring is described in vibrant detail:

"Knight," quath heo, "trewe,
Ich wene ich mai thee leve:
Tak nu her this gold ring:
God him is the dubbing;
Ther is upon the ringe
Igrave "Rymenhild the yonge":
Ther nis non betere anonder sunne
That eni man of telle cunne.
For my luvē thu hit were
And on thi finger thu him bere.
The stones beoth of suche grace
That thu ne schalt in none place
Of none duntē beon ofdrad,
Ne on bataille beon amad,
Ef thu loke theran
And thenke upon thi lemman.

(*King Horn*, lines 565 – 580)

This description is an early English example of the preoccupation with rings, and material culture in general that can be associated with the romance genre. The plural ‘stones’ suggest a grand piece, set with multiple gems – making it all the more powerful. As is the case with many of the ring descriptions, the stones are described as having ‘graces’, implying that the power of the ring lies in the stone.

Other examples of rings made magical by their stone settings are abundant in the descriptions of rings. In *Ywain and Gawain* Lunet’s ring of invisibility is described in such a way as suggests the stone is the key element of the magical power:

Whan thou in hand has the stane,
Dere sal thai do the nane;
For the stane es of swilk might,
Of the sal men have na sight.

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 743 – 746)

The specific statement that Lunet makes – that when Ywain has *the stane* in hand, he will beprotected by the power of the ring. The ring itself is given no further power outside that of its stone. The *stane* is of such might that no man may see him while he wears it.

The power of Alundyne’s ring is also bound to the stone:

The vertu that es in the stane

(*Ywain and Gawain*, line 1532)

In *Sir Perceval of Galles*, the motif of the ‘virtue in the stone’ is used again, when the Sleeping Lady describes the power of her magic ring:

Siche a virtue es in the stane,

In alle this werlde wote I nane
Siche stone in a rynge;

(*Sir Perceval of Galles*, lines 1859 – 1861)

Similar phrasing can also be seen in Josian's description of her ring in *Bevis of Hampton* (quoted above).

There seems to be a developed tradition of these descriptions of the rings and their stones within the romances. The specific descriptions of the 'virtues of the stone' follow similar forms when compared directly to one another. The tendency of the lady to specify that her ring is greater than any other in some way also shows signs of belonging to a traditional pattern of use – in the way the rings themselves are described, rather than their practical use.

The stress on the virtues of the stones provides a clear link to the influence of the lapidaries on medieval learning. The lapidaries specifically refer to stones in relation to their graces and virtues. In the *London Lapidary*, the emerald is described as having God-given "vertues" (Evans 1933, 20) – also showing the Christianised belief that stones were given magical powers by God, and not demons. The *North Midland lapidary* claims that Thegolite (Tecolithus) "is foul for to luk to, bot he is precyous of vertu" (Evans 1933, 56). According to the *Peterborough Lapidary*, Rubie "haþe vertu above all oþer precios stones" (Evans 1933, 110) and the *Sloane Lapidary* states that Iaspes (Jasper) "maketh a man hardy in fight; and as many coulors as he hath so many vertues hath he" (Evans 1933, 128). The English lapidaries derive from mutual sources and therefore the tradition of using the term *vertu* can be attributed to the original source material, but the use of the term so frequently in the romances

in relation to magical stones shows that the lapidaries were influential to the romance authors, directly or through wider traditional belief.

Another traditional pattern that emerges in close reading is the use of ritual. Many of the magic rings and stones discussed here show evidence of the importance of ritual in their use, both in the romances and the historical context. Ritual and tradition are also bound up in the general use of rings. The ring as a tangible symbol of a vow or promise is a long standing tradition in material culture, as can be seen in the wedding ring tradition. An important element of the use of rings in both medieval culture and literature is their use alongside verbal oaths and vows. There is a wealth of evidence for the power of the magic rings, and the rings used in medieval social practice, being bound to the rituals of vow making and promises. The literary sources show this in what appears to be an established tradition. The use of the rings in the romances shows that they were often given with conditions attached. In *Ywain and Gawain*, Alundyne bestows her ring upon Ywain under the condition that it will protect him as long as he wears it and thinks on her:

In nane anger sal ye be
Whils ye it have and thinkes on me.

(*Ywain and Gawain*, lines 1529 – 1530)

He is also to return to her within the year. The ring here is functioning on multiple levels. It is a love ring, given to strengthen the bond between husband and wife. It is a magical talisman, given by Alundyne to protect her lover while he is away from her. But it is also a means of security for her – the conditions under which she gives it to Ywain mean that, in wearing it, he is making a vow to hold faith with her. The ring is a physical token of that vow, and if he holds faith, Ywain is worthy of wearing it. Subsequently, when Ywain fails to return to

Alundyne within the year, he has broken his vow. As stated previously, the magical properties of the ring mean that he has no excuse not to keep faith and return as promised. His betrayal is defined by the symbolism behind the ring – he has betrayed her as a lover and also as a knight, as he has broken a vow. The ring is removed from Ywain by Alundyne’s maiden in a public scene of humiliation that shows the importance of the ring in the relationship between the lovers, and the physical removal of the ring acts as a visual representation of the deeper symbolic significance. The motif of a ring given with conditions attached is also apparent in *King Horn*. When giving her ring to Horn, Rymenhild uses similar language to Alundyne by stating that Horn should wear it and think of her:

...Ef thu loke theran
And thenke upon thi lemman.

(*King Horn* lines 579 - 580)

The idea of a knight gazing at his ring and thinking of his lover suggests an understanding of the power of meditation in influencing the mind. The power of the meditation on the ring and the lover is evident in the repetition of the motif throughout *King Horn*. At key moments in the narrative, Horn focuses on the power of the ring by looking at the ring and thinking of his lover, with the same phrase used in a repetitive pattern:

He lokede on is ryng
Ant þohte o Rymenyld þe 3yng.

(*King Horn*, lines 609 - 610)

The same phrase occurs at lines 883 – 884 and lines 1505 – 1506, at times when Horn has need of heightened courage or strength. The power of the ring, for Horn, is seemingly bound

to the meditation on Rymenhild in order for it to offer its full protection, or so the poet wishes to imply in the poetic repetition of the ritual. This union between ring and lady serves as a strong binding of the knight to his promise, if he wishes to enjoy the virtues of the ring. Both Alundyne and Rymenhild want their lovers to remember them by keeping their thoughts trained on them, and the physical reminder of the ring, particularly in Rymenhild's case, has the power of ensuring they will not be forgotten. But the meaning of these conditions is more complex. Both ladies vocally specify that their lover must look on the ring and think of them – ensuring that on acceptance the knight will have agreed to the conditions and therefore bound himself to the vow. But even more significant is that both ladies state that the rings will have power while these conditions are fulfilled. The truth of this is made apparent when Ywain fails to keep his promise, and the magic ring is swiftly removed. In contrast, Horn keeps faith with Rymenhild, and is therefore rewarded with the ring's power. The ring as part of the tradition of keeping faith can be used by both genders, as can be observed with Josian's ring in *Bevis of Hampton*. She wears the ring to ensure that no man will be able to force her to break her fidelity to Bevis.

In medieval culture, rings and vows are also bound together in a way not far removed from the traditions in the romances. Rings are associated with the vows of marriage and betrothal – vows that were taken as seriously (in theory) as the feudal oaths and the religious vows taken by the monastic communities. The verbal contract of the marriage vow is tied up with the ritual of exchanging rings as part of the wider symbolism of rings as powerful tokens of unity and faith. In the romances, the vows bound to the lovers' rings are also vows of unity and faith, but the nature of the genre means that the concept of the hero settling down in matrimonial bliss lacks the excitement of his adventures. Therefore, the rings are given as

reminders, so the knight does not forget his vows to his lady, while also rewarding him with her protection during their separation. The conditions applied to their use, however, ensure that the knight must keep to the vow. The ring and vow are bound together and one is meaningless without the other.

Romance shows evidence of the more standard practices of ring-use for marriage contracts. In *Sir Perceval of Galles*, Perceval's role as king and ruler of Lady Lufamour's land is stated with the ring being the visual and symbolic representation of their union:

..Fro tham than he rade:
Left Percevell the yung
Off all that lande to be kyng,
For he had with a ryng
The mayden that it hade.

(*Sir Perceval of Galles*, lines 1752 – 1756)

The process of the woman and her possessions being bound to the man she marries is a long established and accepted tradition in the medieval world, just as male heirs preceded female heiresses in the inheritance stakes. The eagerness of women to have a knight to manage and protect their lands, as also apparent in *Alundyne* and the wealthy lady who provides the healing ointment in *Ywain and Gawain*, is perhaps exaggerated in the romances to fit the courtly ideal – there were surely some medieval heiresses who were not so eager to give up their power .

The ring given by Sir Eglamour to Cristabelle, along with their pre-marital consummation, was considered a legitimate union under canon law, albeit thought to be clandestine and requiring a penance:

"Damysell," he seyde, "ther is a poynt undon:
I wyll wend, and com agayn full son
Wyth the help of Mary mylde.
A good ryng I schall gyfe the:
Kepe hyt well, my lady fre,
Yyf God send the a chylde."

(*Sir Eglamour*, lines 700 – 705)

The unusual example of a reference to a child between lovers in romance, and yet the fact that they are considered to be the virtuous characters while the earl is the evil, shows how binding the combination of betrothal, ring and consummation was in the eyes of the church, and therefore in the eyes of God. Despite the rarity of such things in the romances, these pre-marital rituals were not unusual in medieval society. Incidentally, Sir Eglamour's ring is not explicitly a magic ring, and is therefore a genuine representation of traditional ring use rather than part of the magical ring motifs of the romances. It follows the cultural standards of betrothal - of male to female giving. It is notable that in the romances this tradition is not represented – in fact many of the rings are given by a lady to a knight, and not vice versa. The tradition of the lady bestowing her precious magical ring upon her lover shows a strong theme of personal sacrifice that is perhaps not always apparent in the female characters of the romances. In some cases there is a strong sense that the lady in question is driven by self-interest – for instance in *Ywain and Gawain* Alundyne is driven to marry Ywain out of a desire for her lands to be adequately defended, and the gift of her magic ring to Ywain has a hint of the idea that she wants him protected and back within the year so he can fulfil his duty as protector of her assets. In contrast, Lunet gives her ring to Ywain out of a desire to help him in repayment of an old favour, and her gesture seems all the more grand for it. As a maid to Alundyne, it can be presumed that she is not overly wealthy, and so the gift of the precious

magical ring to Ywain shows an act of extreme generosity. It is true that she only lends him the ring, but the act is driven by a selfless desire to help.

The tradition of a woman giving a ring to a man is not strongly represented in the historical record. As might be expected, there is a wealth of evidence that women were the recipients of such gifts, or that the gifts were mutually given. The reciprocal nature of some examples, such as many of the posy rings, shows that rings could be given by men or women to their loved one. In a romance context, the lady bestowing a token on her hero fits with the courtly love motif of favours, and so the gift of a ring, especially a magical ring, is perfectly natural. Here, romance does not reflect reality, rather the rules of popular fashion that has little or no representation in the historical record. Lightbown (1992, 73) explains this lack of evidence:

Here the lover had of necessity to conceal his love under enigmatic language and symbols, so as not to expose the lady of his thoughts to scandal and dishonour. In the fourteenth century the device and motto provided a resolution of this problem, for they enabled the chivalric lover to conceal within an image – a flower or bird, a letter – the object of his cult, while figuring, if only by remote allusion and private significance, the mood of his passion, whether of hope, longing or despair.

Much of the sentiment behind courtly love involved clandestine declarations, and therefore it is hardly surprising that there is a paucity of examples of ladies giving rings to men given that their reputations potentially at stake. The historical record here fails to illuminate this romance tradition in any abundance, but enough cultural evidence exists to suggest such practices occurred.

Lightbown's (1992) observation of the courtly love practice of using mottoes or devices brings to mind the popular use of inscription on rings. The tradition of engraving rings with words or phrases is tied up with the belief in the power of the object. The use of inscription on jewellery and other objects is an ancient practice, and the reasons for it are manifold and relative to the culture. For inhabitants of medieval Europe, inscription on rings seems to have had a ritually or symbolically significant purpose. The power of words and letters in medieval culture seems to have been considered great and prestigious. The inscriptions of fupark characters on swords and other objects during the Anglo-Saxon period shows the importance of ascribing power and prestige to an object. Similarly, the widespread and popular use of amulets and talismans with inscribed words or letters were considered at least as powerful as the use of herbs (Kieckhefer 2000, 77). Bernard Gordon (d. 1320), a recognised authority on medical matters, "believed one could ward off epileptic attacks by carrying the names of the biblical magi on one's person" (Kieckhefer 2000, 77). The authority of such examples suggests that the belief was established enough to be considered to be medicinally effective. The power of the written (or inscribed) word was therefore a powerful magical tool, and the use of amulets is studied in detail by Don C. Skemer in *Binding Words* (2006) – a recommended study for a more detailed discussion of the use of words and magic. It is not too much of a leap to suggest that the engraving of secular rings with inscriptions was meant as a means of strengthening their power. Posy rings are the most recognised examples of this tradition. As the name suggests, the inscriptions are inspired by 'poesy', and share the amatory nature of courtly love poetry. There are multiple examples in the historical record of rings inscribed with messages – some directly personal, some ambiguous and some generally amatory but not specific. A fifteenth century English example, a Black Letter Posy ring (Fig. 1), is engraved with the motto "a mon pouer sans decevoir" (Medieval Rings 2008). A similar

example from the Fishpool Hoard has an inscription engraved inside the hoop. It reads “lift up your whole heart”. Numerous amatory inscriptions follow the theme of the heart as a tangible gift that can be given. Two rings inscribed with the phrase *mon cuer entier* (‘my whole heart’) were found in Sussex in 2005. Other jewellery shows similar symbolic meaning; a heart-shaped brooch from the Fishpool Hoard bears the inscription *Je suy vostre sans de partier* – ‘I am yours wholly’. The use of the heart shape is an interesting occurrence that deserves further attention. A few rare examples of love rings show heart-shaped bezels. One fourteenth-century example is set with an unpolished ruby in the shape of a heart, with an amatory inscription (Hindman 2007, 146). In *Troilus and Criseyde* a brooch with a heart-shaped ruby is given to Troilus by Criseyde (line 1371). In addition, there is another historical reference to such a stone – the ruby left to Katherine Swynford by John of Gaunt, which has been identified as the same heart-shaped ruby of her descendent, Joan Beaufort. Chaucer’s proximity to the court in the later fourteenth century, and therefore no doubt to John of Gaunt, would suggest that the ruby in *Troilus and Criseyde* may have been inspired by observing such a jewel in reality (Patch 1935, 316). Jean, Duke of Berry, had “a ruby, table-cut and shaped like a heart, set in a ring, which he bought in 1406 for the enormous sum of 3,000 gold écus” (Lightbown 1992, 14) - a fashion which according to Lightbown would have been seen in England by the thirteenth century (Lightbown 1992, 17). The heart shape only further enhances the symbolism of the ring-giving; the giver is literally giving their heart to their beloved. A fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Romance of Alexander* has a marginal illustration of a woman offering her heart to her lover – in this case an actual heart-shaped object representing her own heart (MS. Bodl. 264, fol. 59 recto). The gift of the heart is therefore an established tradition in the culture of medieval love. If the heart-shape is paired

with an amatory inscription, as in the examples above, the sentiment is strengthened and made more personal.

When the customary uses of rings are considered, particularly their use as betrothal and love tokens, the addition of an amatory inscription seems to have a purpose that goes beyond the aesthetic. The power of the written word in a society with a limited literate community was stronger. Those who can read and write have had the time and money for education, and therefore are socially elevated above those who cannot, making literacy as much of a status symbol as material wealth. Hinton (2005) ascribes the use of literary inscriptions as suggesting that the owners or recipients were literate, or “needed to be flattered by the presumption that they would be”. Initially, this is probably the case, although as the fashion grew this may have become a less important factor. It seems that the amatory inscriptions on the rings are used to strengthen the symbolic sentiment behind the giving and wearing of the ring –a means of binding the promise or wish to the ring.

In contrast to the archaeological record romance shows few examples of engraving of magic rings, however there are indications that the power of the rings were occasionally bound up with the process of inscription. The ring in *King Horn* is inscribed with the name ‘Rymenhild the yonge’, for the ring’s owner. The ring’s precious stones are likely to be the main source of the power, but the fact that the inscription is mentioned at all suggests that it has a relevant function other than merely identifying its owner. Rymenhild bestows the ring upon Horn as a symbol of their betrothal – and the name on the ring adds strength to the bond between them. Horn wears a ring that is not only symbolically but visibly bound to Rymenhild. Heather (1931, 383) states that the stone in Rymenhild’s ring is engraved, rather than the band, but this is not specified in the text, and it seems that Heather is choosing to

consider the established tradition of engraved stones in his analysis rather than the text itself. Heather's assumption that Rymenhild's ring held an engraved stone is not unfounded; rather it is based on the lapidary evidence and numerous examples from the archaeological record. The practice of actually engraving the stone itself, rather than the band, seems to originate from the Roman period – and on occasion these stones were mounted in later settings. Numerous examples of engraved stones are evident in the archaeological record – examples can be seen in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and can be seen in rings in the collections of Les Enluminures.

Heather (1931, 228) identifies in the Anglo-Norman Lapidaries that if an engraved beryl is set in a ring with some "savine" the man or woman who wears that stone on betrothal will never feel anger towards the wife or husband. The wearer will overcome all men. He can cure his eyes if they pain him, and the stone avails generally for illness. In his attempts to identify the stone in Lunet's ring, Heather also unearthed another engraved stone with magical properties:

"if you find a hyacinthus engraved with a figure half woman and half fish you are told to mount the stone in good gold. Put the ring on your finger, cover the stone with wax, hold it tightly in your fist and you will be seen of no man"

Again, it is the bizarre ritualistic practices involved in the wearing that suggest that the belief in the power of precious stones was bound up in the more complex and controversial practices that hover on the line between magic and perceived necromancy.

While the use of magic rings in literature and material culture is apparent in numerous examples, it does not necessarily suggest that the belief in such marvels was seriously held.

Records show that magic rings and stones were used in practice, as means of protection or for other purposes, and therefore the belief in their properties must have been established.

However, it does not follow that the belief was taken as seriously as other beliefs, such as the belief in hell or the existence of devils. It seems more likely that the stones were considered to have properties, but the view of this fell in line more with superstition than strong belief.

Evidence for this can be drawn from the fact that information about magical rings and stones is sparse – relatively few records tell of their use and even of their existence. There is also evidence that the belief was taken more seriously by some than by others – made apparent by the suggested parody of the magic ring tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The ring is not offered in the strictly traditional manner – the lady does not verbally describe the virtues of the ring, or attach any conditions to its wear, on the contrary she is giving it (she says) even though she is getting nothing from him. But the ring is described in a way that highlights its beauty:

Ho ra3t hym a riche rink of red golde werke3,
Wyth a starande ston stondande alofte,
Pat bere blusschande beme3 as þe bry3t sunne;
Wyt 3e wel, hit wat3 worth wele ful hoge.

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 1817 – 1820)

The materialistic preoccupation of this description gives the obvious interpretation that Gawain's refusal is related to his desire not to be seduced by material wealth. The symbol of a ring, as has been proven, can also be construed as a very intimate gift, and Lady Bertilak's married state would make Gawain's acceptance of the ring somewhat inappropriate – although romance does not always adhere to the rules of fidelity when courtly love is involved. Despite these surface interpretations, the nature of the scene in the context of the established tradition of magic rings in romance suggests that the ring giving is designed

gently to satirise the generic use of rings as love tokens offered to a knight by a lady. The fact that Lady Bertilak presses the ring on Gawain can be interpreted as a hint to its special nature – she wants him to take this ring, as it is later revealed that she is testing him. But in the context of the traditions of ring use in romance, the fact that Gawain refuses the ring is a subversion of the norm, and undoubtedly the audience would have the knowledge to recognise the playful nature of such a twist.

Similarly, in the *Squire's Tale* Chaucer's parody of the generic use of magical objects in romance is indicative of the extent to which the traditions were recognised. The sword, the horse, the ring and the mirror are all items that are familiar in the romance genre, and their magical status is used in a satirical manner to highlight the extent to which such objects are present in the literature, and the way they are used to further the plot. It seems clear that Chaucer's tale is satirical, and that he uses the Squire to make observations about the romance genre. Benson remarks that the slow pace of the Squire's narrative voice and the unfinished nature of the tale is part of Chaucer's satire on the length and magnitude of many medieval romances (Benson 1987, 13). The elaborate magical objects are another element of Chaucer's subtle parody of the genre.

A notable practice in medieval literature is the process of endorsing a statement or claim with a reference to an authority in a scientific or academic field, often Classical. Chaucer parodies the practice in his *Canterbury Tales*, with characters such as the Nun's Priest's cockerel Chauntecleer citing authorities on dreams such as Scipio (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, line 3124). Romance in general lacks this tradition – it is a genre designed to be removed from the grounding of reality, and therefore its messages are not authorised by great

scholars, but by the actions and encounters of the protagonist. However, it is likely that in writing his *Squire's Tale*, Chaucer was well aware of the history of magic rings and gemstones. It has been suggested that Chaucer was indeed a student of the lapidaries, and his writings include many precious stones, particularly in the House of Fame. The symbolism of certain gems does not go unnoticed by Chaucer, as a master of allegory and hidden meaning, nor does he apparently take them as seriously as others might.

Conclusion

The historical record and the romances show a considerable and varied usage of gemstones. However, the popularity of the ring as a vessel for these stones exceeds in both contexts. So the question could be posed – why are rings such a popular choice?

The answer seems to manifest itself when the evidence from multiple disciplines are examined. When studied alone, the magic stones in the romance have certain power. The stones with rings, when studied alongside the historical and archaeological record, have an enhanced meaning and power that far exceeds their perceived literary use. As has been shown, the rings and stones do fulfil practical functions in the form and structure of the text, but the context of the social and material culture of the historical period shows that the implications of using a magic ring, or a ring with a magic stone, touches on deeper and more profound symbolism that the medieval audience would undoubtedly have recognised. The combined fields of ring symbolism and inherent beliefs, along with the magic stones and their perceived virtues, form a far more detailed interpretation of these objects, both within the romances and their context in the medieval world.

The trans-genre blending of the lapidary studies into literary culture shows that the subject provided an area of interest for the audience, even where the belief in the magical properties of the stones was not firmly established. Whether the magic stones in the romances were included because of a wide public interest in the lapidaries, or the interest in the lapidaries stemmed from the magic stones in the romances is a matter beside the point. It is clear from reading medieval romance that it was both an inspiration for the courtly lifestyle and a product of it – in terms of social behaviour as well as material culture. Life and art here

seemed to imitate each other, or aspired to do so. What is relevant is that the factual and the literary clearly influenced each other – romance and science overlapping in the interests of the audiences. The wonder and mystery of the magical stones would be reason enough for an audience interested in the fantasy worlds of romance to be intrigued and fascinated by their properties, and as a result the extended study of the lapidaries would only serve as enhancing their understanding of the meanings within their literary culture.

As ever, the concepts of the medieval imagination and the beliefs of the medieval population as a whole are beyond our grasp. The beliefs of one person, or a specific group of people, can sometimes be determined using written evidence, but such an investigation is fraught with problems – the intentions of the writer not least. An attempt to analyse the belief systems of medieval people in general is an even more complex and controversial task. In approaching topics concerning the way something was perceived by the medieval mind, all that can be done is a thorough examination of the available evidence – a definite conclusion can never be reached.

However, as has been shown in this study, it is possible to gather evidence from literary, archaeological and historical disciplines that can shed light on the perceptions of people from varied backgrounds and social groups. The belief in magical rings and stones can be observed in the less privileged societies as well as the wealthy and educated. Primarily, though, it is the people who were sufficiently able to have access to the romances whose beliefs we are concerned with, in order to make the connection between literature and material culture.

By examining the evidence from multiple disciplines, it has been demonstrated that more complex interpretations of magical objects in medieval romance can be made. The

literature of a society is undoubtedly influenced by – and an influence on – its own culture. The material culture of medieval society is clearly expressed in the romances. As has been demonstrated here, the physical and written evidence from the archaeological and historical record gives an enormous amount of information about the perceptions of magical rings and stones, and therefore any interpretation of these objects in the romances is more informed by the interdisciplinary approach. The evidence clearly shows that rings were an important ritual element in medieval culture, but the addition of knowledge about the beliefs bound to them, both in literature and society, shows that they were regarded as far more significant than mere trinkets or showy examples of visual wealth. The stones set in the rings take on a whole new meaning in relation to the magical properties ascribed to the rings in the romances when their folkloric history is examined, and so it is essential that one wishing to study them familiarises himself with the wealth of contextual information before attempting to interpret their literary use. To approach the magic rings as purely functional in the plots of the romances, or as mere literary motifs that belong solely to the magical thematic is to ignore the evidence of the contemporary mindset regarding these objects.

Appendix

Fig. 1

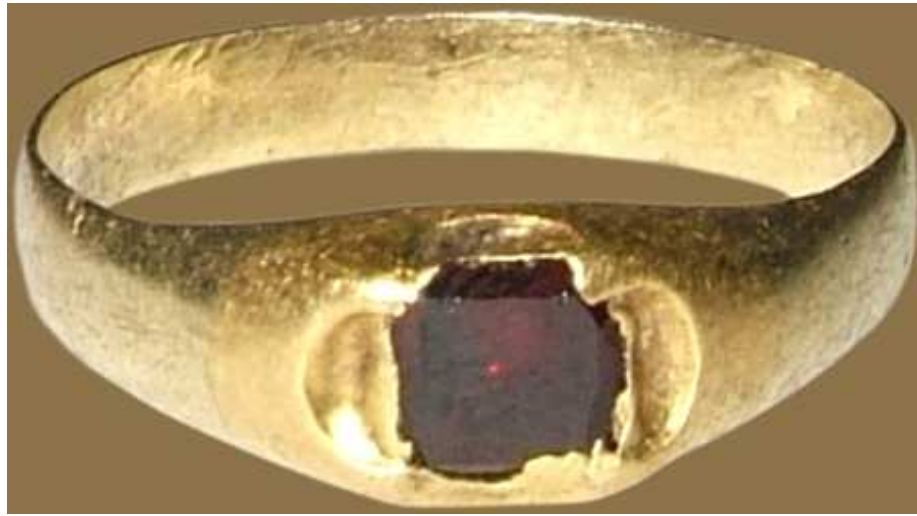


LES ENLUMINURES, Paris and Chicago

Gold Posy Ring made in England, 15thC

The black letter inscription reads *a mon pouer sans decevoir*. The term 'black letter' is used due to the high contrast of colour between the gold and the dark inscription. The amatory phrase is a good example of a promise bound to a ring. This ring belongs to the collection of Les Enluminures.

Fig. 2



LES ENLUMINURES, Paris and Chicago

Gold ring set with red glass, England 15thC

This convincing red glass 'gemstone' is a good example of how cheaper materials were used to imitate precious stones – whether to fool a buyer into thinking they were getting a ring possessing certain powers or for the wearer to give the impression of wealth at a lower cost.

Fig. 3



LES ENLUMINURES, Paris and Chicago

Gold Posy Ring, England 15thC

Black Letter ring with inscription *lo / ial desir* (“faithful desire”). The amatory theme is another example of a love ring with an inscription binding the promise – in this case, the vow of faithful desire, supposedly desire only for the true love. The ring is beautifully decorated with foliate engraving and is now missing the original enamel. This particular inscription is recorded in Evans 1931, 10.

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