

### Animal Imagery and Oral Discourse in Havelok's First Fight

Scholars interested in the development of English romance have long found the later thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century *Havelok the Dane* both an intriguing and a puzzling example of the artistry of the period. The poem was apparently composed in Lincolnshire based on a tale which was known in the area from at least the twelfth century, when it appears in two versions, one at the beginning of Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* and the other in a courtly poem known as the *Lai d'Haveloc*. The story in the English poem concerns Havelok, a young Danish prince whose regent Godard steals his crown after the death of King Birkabeyn. The usurper orders Grim, a fisherman, to drown the child, but, instead, Grim takes Havelok to England and raises him as his own son in Grimsby. Havelok soon takes a job as a cook in Lincoln Castle, where he is forced to marry Goldeburgh, an English princess whose crown is similarly usurped by her regent Godrich. Havelok and Goldeburgh return to Grimsby, where Havelok's ancestry is revealed through a light shining from his mouth and a cross-shaped birthmark, and they sail to Denmark to take back Havelok's throne. Upon accomplishing this task, Havelok leads an army to England, defeats Godrich, and becomes king of both countries. The poem's authorship and audience have been discussed extensively in recent years with the result that *Havelok* has been viewed as anything from an oral tradition based ultimately on history before the Norman Conquest (Deutschbein) to a thirteenth-century handbook for princes (Staines). At the heart of this debate is the poet's distinctly oral mode of discourse, a lively and attractive style which some have thought to be a reflection of the origins of the tale and others a consciously adopted posture.<sup>1</sup> In the discussion below, I hope to shed further light on both the origins of the poem in oral tradition and the artistry of the poet by examining the implications of a single episode in the poem, Havelok's first fight.

A crucial turning point in the plot comes when Havelok has arrived in Denmark disguised as a merchant. He is taken in by Ubbe, a local nobleman, who entertains Havelok and his family and gives them a bed for the night in the house of his *greyue*, or administrator, Bernard Brun (1742-65). That night, the house is attacked by a band of sixty-one thieves, whom Havelok defeats with the help of his three step-brothers, Hugh Raven, Robert the Red, and William Wendut (1766-1920). Ubbe, hearing the news, arrives on the scene, where he is given an account

of the battle by Bernard, who names the leader of the thieves as one Griffin Galle. Impressed by Havelok's prowess, Ubbe has his wounds healed and invites Havelok to stay with him. The episode differs considerably in its details from Gaimar's account, in which Havelok encounters Sigar, the seneschal of his conquered father (here called Gunter). Six men, variously referred to as "bachelers" (531) or "bricuns" (556) rough up Havelok's servants and abduct his wife because of her great beauty. Havelok grabs an axe and pursues them into the street, killing three, then two, and cutting the hand off of the last. The couple are pursued by the townsfolk and eventually take refuge in a church-tower, from which Havelok throws stones at further assailants. Sigar, riding up, notices Havelok's strength, and, reminded of Gunter, calls off the attack (501-68). The version in the *Lai d'Havelok* is substantially the same, although it portrays the action with greater drama, in particular by having Havelok renarrate the events after the fight is finished. In both texts Sigar's motives are suspect (the *Lai* calls him the "seneschal, ki pas n'est bel" (716)), and Havelok's assailants are said to be Sigar's men.

The episode has been discussed by Maldwyn Mills, who suggests that the original version of the episode is best represented by the *Lai* and that the numerous differences between the Anglo-Norman versions and *Havelok* are the result of the poet's faulty memory of his source, which left a gap for the interpolation of other material, which the poet got from the thirteenth-century poem *Richars li Biaus* (24-28).<sup>2</sup> The details in question are the light shining from Havelok's face (663-64) and his cross-shaped birthmark (668-69), the sixty-one robbers (3302-08) who attack him, and the highlighting of the first seven robbers he kills (3369). According to Mills, the insertion of this material helps explain the troubling disappearance of Ubbe's bodyguard of sixty men and ten knights (corresponding to Sigar's "homes" (720) in the *Lai*) only to be replaced by the sixty-one thieves. Whilst his conclusion about the relationship between the two groups of men is plausible, Mills gives no motivation for the poet's changes beyond suggesting that the fight against a group of "*laddes*" was congenial to his literary taste (28). Moreover, Mills does not discuss the many other details of the Havelok-poet's expansion of the episode, its descriptive imagery, or the introduction of the new character Bernard Brun. It is my contention that these details reveal a great deal more about the poet's sources, interests, and methodology.

The scene is a tour de force of descriptive narrative, dramatically portraying the events through extreme violence and use of dialogue. The savage nature of the battle is revealed through grisly detail, as when Havelok slays the fifth thief:

þe fifte þat he ouertok  
 Gaf he a ful sor dint ok  
 Bitwen þe sholdres þer he stod,  
 þat he speu his herte-blod. (1817-20)

Likewise, Havelok is wounded so that “þe blod ran of his sides / So water þat fro þe welle glides” (1851-52). The poet uses dialogue to add greater drama to the story, as when Havelok’s step-brother, Hugh Raven, calls upon his other brothers to arms (1879-90) and when an account of the battle given afterwards by Bernard Brun to his master Ubbe (1955-2037). Much of the narrative is also driven by a confused mishmash of symbolic imagery which suggests that we are meant to read more into the action. As the action begins, Havelok is repeatedly portrayed in Christ-like terms, a depiction which has been established earlier through the cross-shaped “kynemark” on his shoulder (605). This imagery recurs in the fight scene when Havelok picks up a door-jam in a manner that evokes Christ’s hefting of the Cross. Standing before the door, he calls out to the thieves “Comes swiþe vnto me / Daþeyt hwo you henne fle!” (1798-99) in a manner which both recalls Christ’s “come unto me” (Matt. 11.28) and intimates the fate of those who spurn him.<sup>3</sup> The line is in fact echoed by other characters in the scene. For instance, Havelok’s call appears to follow on from Bernard’s command to the thieves to leave:

*Goth henne swiþe fule þeues!*  
 For bi þe Louerd þat man on leues,  
 Shol Ich casten þe dore open,  
 Summe of you shal Ich drepen,  
 And þe oþre shal Ich kesten  
 In feteres and ful faste festen!” (1781-86, my emphasis)

Hugh Raven also echoes the quotation with

Roberd, William, hware ar ye?  
 Gripeth eþer unker a god tre,  
 And late we nouth þise doges fle  
 Til ure louerd wreke [be]!  
*Cometh swiþe, and folwes me.* (1882-86, my emphasis)

Such echoes, with or without irony, are typical of the scene. If there is a pattern, it is apparently that Bernard's words warn the "fule" to flee; Havelok's words give them no choice but to fight him, and Hugh Raven's words call for followers to avenge the offenders of their lord. The variations on a single linguistic formula reflect the different roles played by each character in the episode, but the precise nature of these roles will be explored further below.

The number of thieves may well have been suggested by *Richars li Biaus*, as Mills suggests, but, since that poem does not describe their death's in detail, the Havelok-poet's elaborate gory account of the battle must be either invented or taken from another source. Havelok kills the first three robbers with one blow so that their brains lie exposed to the stars (1807-10); he knocks out the right eyeball of the fourth before killing him with another head-blow (1811-16); the fifth is struck between the shoulders, causing his blood to spurt out (1817-20); Havelok breaks the neck of the fleeing sixth thief (1821-24); and the seventh dies faster than a man can run a mile when Havelok casts the bar into his breast (1825-32). In light of the earlier Christian imagery, the number seven suggests that Havelok is up against the seven deadly sins; but the scene is not an allegorical one. I know of no depictions of Christ fighting the seven deadly sins in medieval iconography, but images of God looking down upon the sins as a form of warning about retribution to come are fairly common.<sup>4</sup> In juxtaposing Christ imagery with the seven deadly sins, the poet may be implying that Havelok is the instrument of God's punishment, a sort of Christian hero whose struggle works on both a literal and an anagogical level.<sup>5</sup>

The subsequent imagery, however, is difficult to place in this context. The poet makes frequent comparisons between the characters and animals as soon as the first seven thieves are dispatched. At this point, Havelok is surrounded by the other thieves:

Þey drowen ut swerdes, ful god won,  
 And shoten on him so don on bere,  
 Dogges þat wolden him to-tere,  
 Þanne men doth þe bere beyte. (1838-41)

Havelok is now likened to a baited-bear being harassed by dogs. In fact, the poet proceeds to advance the narrative with a succession of similes likening characters to animals. Not only are the thieves thrice compared to dogs (1840, 1923, 1968), but Havelok is likened to a boar, a lion, and a hound (1867-68, 1990, 1995), and Hugh Raven to a hart (1873). This animal imagery seems remarkably out of place next to the Christ imagery the poet has previously built up, and it is worth taking a look at what might be achieved by it.

The cultural and literary significance of bear-baiting is not well understood, which makes a clear understanding of the poet's choice of image difficult.<sup>6</sup> An early representation of bear-baiting can be seen in the Bayeux Tapestry, where a man with a sword prods a chained bear; however, the type referred to in *Havelok* more closely resembles that described by Compton Reeves: "In one form of bear-baiting a gang of five or six dogs would be set upon a bear, and the entertainment was to watch the fight and the increasing agitation of the bear, and bet on the survival of the animals involved" (101). An account from the early fifteenth-century *vulgaria* by an unknown grammar master at Magdalen School, Oxford, gives some indication of the appeal of the sport:

All the yonge folkes almoste of this towne dyde rune yesterday to the castell to se a bere  
 batyde with fers dogges within the wallys. It was greatly to be wondrede, for he dyde  
 defende hymselfe so with hys craftynes and his wyllynes from the cruell doggys  
 methought he sett not a whitt be their woodenes nor by their fersnes. (Nelson 27; Gray  
 276)

Unlike the type of bear-baiting portrayed in the Bayeux Tapestry, the popular form of bear-baiting did not entail any test of human bravery in the face of danger but seems to have been motivated by curiosity, a fascination at the bear's power to defend itself against the dogs.<sup>7</sup> Bears are sometimes captured and made to function as beasts of burdens in saints' lives (Réau 110-11,

130) and they frequently occur in medieval iconography muzzled or enchained, presumably by their keepers, or “berewards.”<sup>8</sup> Hence the appeal of bear-baiting seems in part to involve the tension between the danger of the bear’s ferocity and the rendering of it as harmless by captivity. However, for Shakespeare the baited bear was apparently an image of martyr-like suffering, as in Macbeth’s “They have tied me to a stake: I cannot fly, / But, bear-like, I must fight the course” (*Macbeth* 5.7.1-2) and Olivia’s “Have you not set mine honour at the stake, / And baited it with all th’unmuzzled thoughts / That tyrannous heart can think?” (*Twelfth Night* 3.1.119-21).<sup>9</sup> It is entirely possible that the baited-bear had similar connotations three hundred years earlier. If so, then the baited bear is an appropriate image beside others which ask us to associate Havelok with Christ.<sup>10</sup>

However, the bear imagery in the poem is more extensive than a mere four lines. Havelok is not in chains, at least not physically, at the time of the fight, but he does have a “bereward” of a sorts in the form of Bernard Brun. The name Bernard comes from the Germanic words for “bear” and “hard,” but, after the loss of the initial consonant, the second element could have been reinterpreted as “ward,” either through folk etymology or deliberate punning.<sup>11</sup> In *Havelok* it would certainly be appropriate to connect Bernard with “bereward” since Bernard is indeed set up as a guard over Havelok.<sup>12</sup> The poet emphasises the association by giving him the surname “Brun,” Brown, a common epithet for bear.<sup>13</sup> More general punning on the word “bear” may occur elsewhere in the poem: Havelok takes a job as one of the “bermen” (869, 888) when he goes to Lincoln, and he is taken in by the cook, whose name we eventually learn is Bertram (2899). Hence it is possible that the bear-baiting image is an intentional association between Havelok and the bear with more than passing significance.

For a poet from eastern England, which had been heavily colonised by Scandinavians in the preceding centuries, bear imagery may have been especially associated with the bear heroes—normally characters with bear ancestry, bear-like strength, or who had killed a bear—of Anglo-Scandinavian literary and folk traditions. These bear heroes may have had their origins in the common “bear’s son” motif of folktale or from the bear-like warrior of heroic literature, whose origins in cultic practices also gave rise to the Old Norse *berserkr* “bear shirt,” a warrior who takes on the battle fierceness of, or even transforms into, a bear (Arent 150-51).<sup>14</sup> Interaction between folk tradition and heroic literature often blended the two types, so that their separate origins can be hard to distinguish, and, to go by the Scandinavian evidence, the hero’s

relationship to the bear frequently did not survive (Stitt 23-25 and 204-08). Even where none of these elements remained in the story, the word survived in the Old English poetic vocabulary as a word for hero or warrior: *beorn*.

Bear heroes were still current in Anglo-Scandinavian England in the later Middle Ages. For instance, the story of Bodvar Bjarki, “little bear,” preserved in *Hrólfs Saga Kraka* was apparently circulating in eastern England during the thirteenth century, since it influenced the account of Earl Siward of Northumbria in the *Vita et Passio Waldevi* found in MS Douai 852, a manuscript associated with Crowland in Lincolnshire (Wright 127).<sup>15</sup> According to the *Vita*, Siward’s father was called Beorn, who was himself the son of a bear. Most likely Siward’s ancestry was suggested by the name of his historical mother Bera “female bear,” and the modifications made under the influence of the story of Bodvar Bjarki, whose parents were called Bjorn and Bera. Similar modifications may have been made to the Havelok-story, since the original name of Havelok’s father, Gunter, comes to be replaced by Birkabeyn in the course of the thirteenth century (Smithers xxiv-xxvi). The usual explanation of this name is that it means “birch-bone” or “birch-leggings,” but by the thirteenth or fourteenth century this meaning may have been less transparent, and the first element could conceivably have been connected with Bjarki using the same folk etymologisation or punning described for the name Bernard above. The second element *-beyn* can also be explained with reference to Bodvar Bjarki’s having killed a man by throwing a bone at him, which perhaps inspired Havelok’s killing of the seventh thief by throwing the door-bar (Slay 75-76, Byock 49).<sup>16</sup>

There are further connections between the material about Bodvar Bjarki circulating in Anglo-Scandinavian England and *Havelok*. In the *Vita et Passio Waldevi* Siward meets an old man who gives him a banner called “Ravenlandeye,” the story of which was widespread in different versions throughout East Anglia, particularly in association with the invasion of the Danes Ingwar and Ubbe (Wright 126-27). The old man clearly has his origin in a story of Odin, whose presence in the Havelok-legend Edmund Reiss detects in the character of Grim. Reiss argues that the name Hugh Raven used for one of Grim’s sons derives from Scandinavian mythology, where Huginn is the name of the raven who accompanies Odin. On balance, I think that Reiss is likely to be correct in deriving Hugh Raven from Huginn, but for the wrong reasons. Reiss believes that the mythological underpinnings of the plot attest to the age of the version of the Havelok story in *Havelok the Dane*—a belief founded on the assumption of that there was an

*ur*-Havelok (122). More likely, the poet has merely borrowed the name (and perhaps also that of Ubbe) from other Scandinavian-derived material circulating in his own time and then given it a form uniquely his own, following a habit of providing a descriptive byname, as he does for Robert þe Rede, William Wendut, and Bernard Brun.<sup>17</sup> All these names are unique to the Middle English poem. Birkabeyn, by contrast, is attested independently in the *Anglo-Norman Prose Brut* (as is Ubbe in numerous sources). This suggests that the Havelok story acquired some names through literary sources and others through the poet's invention.<sup>18</sup> Reiss, however, is reluctant to accept that the presence of Huginn in the story could be the result of conscious intent for three reasons: that mythological elements are unlikely to have been added by later writers, that the story may not be Scandinavian in origin, and that there are few other parallels in Norse literature to the Havelok-tale (121-23). However, we have seen above that elements of Scandinavian narrative tradition were circulating as late as the thirteenth century in eastern England, that these elements may have entered the story independently of and later than any Anglo-Norman source material, and that the Middle English poem appears to have other connections with Scandinavian literature, particularly the story of Bodvar Bjarki. Hence it is more than likely that Hugh Raven has entered the story through the intervention of the Middle English poet.

So was the name Birkabeyn the poet's innovation or did it exist in his source material? The political events of the late thirteenth century, particularly the events leading up to Edward I's interventions in Scottish politics in the 1290s, may provide one clue. The untimely death of Alexander III in 1286 left Scotland without an heir to the throne, apart from his grand-daughter Margaret, the Maid of Norway, whose mother had married the Norwegian king. To Edward the scenario represented the possibility of a peaceable union between England and Scotland, and he negotiated an agreement for the marriage of the young Queen Margaret with his son, the future Edward II, although Margaret died before the marriage could take place. The political scenario does not exactly parallel the plot of *Havelok the Dane*, but the poet must have seen similarities to the theme of political union between the Scandinavians and the English and to the plot of marriage between two young heirs to their respective kingdoms in his own story.<sup>19</sup> Of particular importance is the journey of the Norwegian magnate Bjarni Erlingsson of Bjarkey to Scotland in 1286 in order to look after the interests of the Maid of Norway: roughly at the same time that Birkabeyn first replaces Gunter as Havelok's father (Wilson 110). Since Bjarni's mission had great importance for English politics, it does not seem unlikely that the men of eastern England



would have heard of him, especially if they were regularly employed by Edward I in pursuing his Scottish policies. The names Bjarni and Bjarkey may well have reminded tellers of the Havelok-tale of Bodvar Bjarki and prompted them to adopt the name in order to transform Havelok into a bear hero, just as was done to Siward in the *Vita et Passio Waldevi*. But, if this is the case, we must account for the fact that the first occurrence of Birkabeyn is found in the version of the Havelok-story given in the *Anglo-Norman Prose Brut* completed in 1272, fourteen years before Bjarni Erlingsson's trip to Scotland. This, however, proves to be less of a problem than it first appears. The earliest manuscript with the name Birkabeyn, MS fonds fr. 14640 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, dates to c. 1300 (Smithers xxiv), so it is possible that the original name Gunter was emended sometime after Bjarni's visit.<sup>20</sup> Given that Birkabeyn is not like the other names which are obviously the poet's invention, it is plausible that it already existed in the form of the story he used as his source. Furthermore, the presence of the name Birkabeyn may suggested the "bear's son" motif to the poet, who then expanded on it by reduplicating bear images elsewhere in the poem.

Whatever the origin of the bear imagery, it appears to be central to the poem—and particularly to the first fight episode—by deliberate design. It is therefore necessary to account for both aspects of the bear imagery—the baited bear and the bear hero—by means other than the output of oral transmission. Both are, admittedly, expressed fleetingly, a fact which no doubt helps to minimise any apparent contradictions or incongruences to an audience sensitive enough to detect them. The same could be said for the sudden shift from Christ imagery to bear imagery. Regardless, consistency does not appear to be the poet's aim, and I suggest as an alternative that the poet attempts to advance his theme by piling up comparisons and inviting us to find similarities between them. In fact, both images reflect Havelok's situation in different ways by portraying their subjects poised at a moment when they are about to realise their power through adversity. Just as Christ's suffering on the cross reveals his authority over mankind and the captivity of the bear reveals its awesome ferocity, so Havelok's conquest over the thieves using only a door-bar marks his imminent acquisition of power and authority over the Danish kingdom. The poet does not intend the bear-baiting image or the Christ image to be the primary one in the scene. Rather, he shifts rapidly from one image to the other, and it is the amalgamation of them which gives the scene its power by creating and re-creating that moment of tension.

The succession of images also produces a sort of transformative effect on the characters when we place them in the context of the rest of the other imagery in the scene. The poet soon moves away from the comparison of Havelok to the baited bear towards conventional symbols of strength and ferocity more familiar in romance, the boar and the lion (1867-68). The very familiarity of these images may cause them to be overlooked, but they have an important effect on Havelok by transforming him into an aggressor. At this point in the episode, Hugh Raven springs into action like a hart (1873), crying out to his brothers not to let the ‘dogs’ flee until their lord is avenged (1884-85). These references to dogs and a hart suggest a hunt where the tables have been turned and the prey turns on the pursuers.<sup>21</sup> A similar effect is achieved by Havelok’s subsequent treatment of the thieves, this time described as “boyes” (1900). Although the word participates in the ornamental alliteration of the line (“Per mihte men wel se boyes bete”), it may be intended as more than a synonym for “laddes” (1842, 1898). Smithers translates “boyes” as “ruffians,” pointing out that the word is connected with Anglo-Norman *embuié* “fettered” (Smithers note to l. 1900). According to the *OED*, the word “boy” is often indistinguishable from “boie,” derived from Anglo-Norman *boie* “fetter,” a term frequently used for an executioner. The latter term is first recorded in the thirteenth century, and so might still have had some association with its original Anglo-Norman meaning in the Havelok-poet’s time. This impression is reinforced by the reference to the punishment of criminal activity implied by the description of the bodies of the thieves the next morning as strewn about like hanged dogs (1923). The use of the term “boyes” therefore contributes to the transformative discourse of the scene. Not only have the dogs attacking the fettered bear themselves felt the bonds of the noose, but the bear himself now has become their executioner.<sup>22</sup> The transformation of Havelok from a baited bear, to a boar or lion, and then to an executor of justice establishes his social liberation from commoner to nobleman, which is then made official by Ubbe’s invitation for him to dwell in the “heye tour” (2074).

We must now turn to Bernard Brun’s version of the battle, the interpretation of which is problematised by apparent inconsistencies between his account and the narrator’s. Nancy Mason Bradbury highlights an inconsistency between the narrator’s statement that Havelok and his companions are at table when the thieves attack (1766) and Bernard’s implication that they are asleep by the wall (1964-65). For Bradbury, this inconsistency reflects the poet’s comfort with the presence of variant versions of the episode in oral circulation, which he happily places side

by side; she suggests that the poet, aware of the existence of variations in the details of the story, uses them effectively for his own version (*Writing Aloud* 91-92). According to Bradbury, the renarration of the fight has a cumulative effect which signals the importance of the episode, contributes to the characterisation of the tellers, and locates and emphasises the “emotional core” of the story (91-93). However, the importance of the episode is not merely created by the effect of repetition. The discussion above will have shown that it is unlikely that the poet simply juxtaposed two independent accounts as he had found them, since both narrations contain elements which are certainly his own work, either by invention or by borrowing from other sources. Furthermore, we have also seen that the battle is described using Christ and bear imagery found elsewhere in the poem, and this suggests that the episode has an important place in the overall narrative structure. We must therefore consider an alternative to Bradbury’s suggestion that the poet did not feel the need to iron out the various inconsistencies created by his work: that he in fact called attention to them. To answer this question, we need to look at the effect produced by the multiple retellings of the Havelok’s first fight.

Mills finds what turns out to be a more revealing inconsistency between the narrator’s and Bernard’s accounts of the fight. He points out that Ubbe sends a bodyguard of seventy men with Havelok, and that the news that reaches him the next morning that Havelok has killed sixty-one of *his* men agrees with this. Mills’ conclusion is that the deaths of Ubbe’s men follow a “primitive” (i.e. original) version of the story, whereas the episode with the thieves is an interpolation (28). However, Mills fails to consider the implications of Bernard’s version of events: that Havelok has killed *seventy* thieves (2027), the same number of men as were in the bodyguard Ubbe gave him. This requires a different explanation, but one which comes easily: the seventy men are an escort who, upon delivering Havelok and his companions into the safe-keeping of Bernard Brun, presumably depart. The house is attacked, and the next day, the events are reported to Ubbe *twice*, both times incorrectly. The first time the number of dead is correct, but Ubbe is told it is his own men who have been killed (1929). The second time Bernard rightly informs Ubbe that the dead men were thieves but gets the number of dead wrong. By drawing attention to the incorrect reporting of events, the poet effectively counters the implication in the Anglo-Norman versions that it is the Danish justiciar’s men who have attacked Havelok; he thus absolves Ubbe from any guilt his part in the plot may have inherited from other version with which the audience might be familiar.

Furthermore, the poet dramatically calls into question Bernard Brun's reliability as an eyewitness by making Bernard and the bearers of "tiding" (1927) to Ubbe give quite different versions of the events of the previous night. Indeed, Ubbe questions the veracity of Bernard's tale, and the latter is forced to swear an oath, backed up by the burgesses, that he is not lying (2009-20). Moreover, the poet calls attention to the corruptibility of the story by a curious expression used by Bernard: "Hwo mithe so mani stonde ageyn, / Bi nither-tale, knith or swein? / He weren bi tale sixti and ten" (2025-27). Smithers derives "nither-tale" from Old Norse *náttar-bel* "dead of night," but the poet's form suggests also a tale told at night, or even a tale told in the dark, in obscurity.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the phrase "bi tale" could well be translated "by all accounts," a Modern English phrase which combines the two possible senses of the poet's "tale": tally and tale. The phrase highlights how the passing of a single night already brings about instability in the story and emphasises the irony that Bernard gets the number of attackers wrong almost as soon as he has sworn an oath that his account of the fight is true. We gain further insight into Bernard's character through his introduction of the name of the leader of the thieves, Griffin Galle. The name Griffin Galle follows the Havelok-poet's typical pattern of employing a byname which describes the forename. Smithers, in his note to line 2030, plausibly explains the name as a reference to a Welshman or a Breton, and it seems that Bernard's speech, more than the original narration, is interested in the political implications of the thieves' attack, and specifically in assigning blame to and directing outrage towards foreigners or Celtic-derived peoples. As Hanning notes, Bernard's speech emphasises the individual and political benefits of Havelok's defeat of the thieves (600-01), and we should probably see in his implication of foreigners an agenda which goes beyond the narrator's interest in Havelok's restoration. Like the narrator, Bernard employs animal images to describe the events of the battle. However, his set of images is very different. First he describes Havelok's deeds as like the driving of mettlesome dogs from a mill-house (1967-68); then he compares Havelok to a boar (1990), and finally he likens him to a hound chasing fleeing hares (1995). In a way, these images seem even more eclectic than the narrator's. Bernard's reference to griffins, mill-houses, boars, hounds, and hares creates a complex mix of signals which range from the mythological to the literary to the prosaic, and it may seem impossible to find a unified meaning in their implications, further undermining his credibility on even a symbolic level.

The differences between Bernard's account and the narrator's may also serve the characterise the narrator himself. The complex amalgamation of images invoked by the fallible Bernard may in fact serve as a sort of reflection, or gloss, on the narrator's own account of the battle, which also offers us a complex amalgamation of images. Unlike the typical reiterations that we find when, for example, the poet has Havelok summarise the plot near the middle of the poem (1401-45), Bernard's account draws attention to the differences created by subsequent narrations—to the fact that the tale gets transformed in the telling—and so casts doubt over the precise details of the entire story. If the introduction of the sixty-one thieves does indeed serve to absolve Ubbe of any guilt associated with his earlier equivalent Sigar, his absolution is ironically a construction of the narrator's own version of events and thus, in principle, is as fallible as Bernard's own wavering authenticity. In a sense, the poet is undermining the authority of his story by constructing his narrator as an unreliable source as well. This is striking, given the interest in reliability found in other extant accounts of Havelok; not only does Gaimar himself claim to derive his account from the "veire estoire" (755-56), but Robert Mannyng, writing in the 1330s, expresses exasperation that he cannot discover the "right story" (Sullens 2.528). The use of narratorial voice to undercut the historical authenticity of a story is not unknown in the Middle Ages. For instance, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was considered unbelievable as authentic history almost as soon as it was completed, and this has led Valerie Flint to suggest that his reference to Archdeacon Walter's book in the British language as his source may well be a jest which acknowledges the fictional element in his work (467-68). Chaucer makes frequent use of a fallible narrative voice, perhaps most notably for our purposes in the Nun's Priest's Tale:

This storie is also trewe, I undertake,  
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,  
 That wommen holde in ful greet reverence. (3211-33)

Here a beast fable is likened to a romance, and, as both may lack historical credibility, the Nun's Priest advises us, "Taketh the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille" (3443). In *Havelok*, the animal imagery of the fight scene makes romance approach the genre of beast-fable; but the same advice applies. What is striking about *Havelok*, in contrast to many other examples of narrative

undercutting, is the way the poet specifically targets oral performance through his characterisation of the narrator as a minstrel-like entertainer who will delight his audience for “a cuppe of ful god ale” (14). The *Havelok*-poet, by undermining the authority of his narratorial voice, is providing us with a dilemma similar to the one Chaucer gives us. He creates doubt about the veracity of the story in order to prompt us to speculate about its deeper meaning. Hence the multiple retellings of Havelok’s battle amplify the details of the event and so reveal its fuller significance, even if the various narrators cannot themselves be trusted to relate “right story.”

This brings us on to Bradbury’s last point about the episode, the way it locates and emphasises the “emotional core” of the poem, the important common denominator of the multiple narrations. Ubbe’s brief reflection on the battle helps point us in the right direction. He, like Bernard, gives an assessment of the previous night’s events in very personal terms.

And yif he liuede, þo foule theues,  
 Þat weren of kaym kin and eues,  
 He sholden hange bi þe necke,  
 Hwan he yelden þus on nihtes,  
 To binde boþe burgmen and knithes.  
 For bynderes loue ich neuere mo,  
 Of hem ne yeue ich nouht a slo. (2045-51)

Apart from further diminishing the guilt hinted at by other versions of the story to which the audience may have had access, Ubbe’s disavowal of the thieves demonstrates the overlap between his own person and the institutional authority he possesses as “iustise” (1629). He never gets the opportunity to exercise this authority because it is superseded by that of Havelok, as rightful king, whose authority the poet has implied by his earlier imagery to be both secular and divine. Ubbe unknowingly recognises this in his use of the common association between thieves and Cain, both rejecters of God’s law, which suggests that the thieves deserve to be punished for more than secular crimes and that their deaths at the hands of Havelok is an appropriate dispenser of divine punishment. As with the accounts of the battle given by the narrator and Bernard, Ubbe’s commentary shows that the extreme violence of the battle is more significant

than a mere display of Havelok's physical prowess; it reveals a good deal more about the social and moral principles which he represents.

Ubbe's insistence that he does not love "bynderes" is the culmination of a succession of images of bondage in the episode: Bernard's threat to cast the thieves in "feteres" (1786), the image of the captive Christ suggested by the door-bar, the bound bear, the fettered "boyes," the burgesses' oath that the thieves were trying to "bind and rob" Havelok (2023-24), and finally Ubbe's own description of the thieves as those who come at night "to binde bope burgmen and knithes" (2049). Anne Scott has detailed the poet's enormous interest in bondage, pointing out that the "recurring images of bonds and bondage enhance our ability to visualize the triumph of good and evil as something tangible, a physical representation or extension of an intangible, abstract concept of justice" (147).<sup>24</sup> According to Scott, "Bondage reduces men to a state of animals and is fitting for the beast-like conduct of criminals" (147); hence the thieves are appropriately described as dogs. But this does not explain why Havelok is also described in animalistic terms or why the thieves themselves are described as "bynderes."<sup>25</sup> In fact, the imagery we find in the fight episode seems to suggest something more complicated. Initially, the Christ-imagery helps to reveal Havelok's divine nature, which is soon to be realised when he regains his throne. In this respect, the poet's use Christ's "Come unto me" is significant, for Christ's words suggest that bondage under his yoke is just: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (*Matthew* 11:28-30). By contrast, associations between sin and bondage are recalled by the equation of the thieves with the seven deadly sins, and perhaps also by an oblique pun using the name of Griffin Galle; compare *Acts* VIII.23: "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity ('in felle amaritudinis et in obligatione iniquitatis video te esse')."

Next Havelok is portrayed in terms familiar to the popular imagination: the baited bear who, like Christ, suffers heroically. Here the animalistic representation serves to draw attention to the suffering of those who are unnaturally bound, contrary to the divine order. In Bernard's speech, none of the animals is bound and their treatment has a more natural form of justice (the thieves are like dogs are chased from the mill-house because they are "crus" (1967), mettlesome, and the boar and the hare, although hunted, are given a fighting chance).<sup>26</sup> Through this animal

discourse, the poet depicts more than one facet of bondage: not only the unjust imposition of bondage on others but also the effect on those who are unjustly bound. The images of animals are appropriate because of their dual nature: animals may be both wild and domesticated (or bound). The poem thus participates, albeit obliquely, in a fablesque narrative tradition in which human moral and social law is depicted through the behaviour of animals. As with the captivity of animals, the bonds of human society waver between just and unjust (at both the individual and at the social levels) and the concept of bondage itself captures both the savage and the tame aspects of human nature.

The poet recognises the malleability of bondage imagery stylistically by adopting a discourse that accommodates its shifting meanings well. In an orally transmitted story the imagery is constantly changing, ultimately producing what is eventually a grand mixed metaphor which challenges the audience to find meaning in it. The poet's own dramatisation of the received Havelok-story employs images culled from a variety of outside sources and so adds to the mixed babble, a point he draws to our attention by giving the battle multiple narrations which differ in their details. Although his account of Havelok's first fight appears at face value to be fragmented and incoherent in its imagery, either because of unpolished writing or the corruption of an earlier story through oral transmission, this is only an illusion. In fact, the instability of meaning produced by the diverse imagery, extensive use of puns, and multiple narratives produces a highly polished literary effect. Even where different accounts of the battle feature different details, each image and each version supplements the previous ones by suggesting another aspect of bondage, prompting us to open our minds the various implications of the episode.

The discussion here concerns, admittedly, only one scene in a poem which has sparked considerable debate amongst critics, but I hope that the conclusions here about the poet's use of his source material and his interest in meta-textual relationships will provide further insight into future readings of the poem as a whole. In part, the episode gives us information about the origins of certain characters. Reiss' suggestion that part of the poem derives from Scandinavian mythological material is partially confirmed, but we can now find its source in folk material circulating in eastern England at the time the poet was working rather than looking to an ancient version of the story. This body of material appears to have been responsible for the adoption of the name Birkabeyn in place of Gunter in the course of the thirteenth century, though the



*Havelok*-poet was probably not responsible for this change. On the other hand, the poet does seem to be responsible for the names of the new characters Bernard Brun, William Wendut, Robert the Red, Hugh Raven, and Bertram the cook (and one suspects Earl Reynier of Chester could be added to the list, although the evidence discussed here does not permit it). The names Bernard and Bertram were probably chosen because they appeared to contain the word “bear,” an animal whose multiple associations in popular culture and heroic literature (especially in the former Danelaw) were particularly significant for the poet in depicting Havelok as a Christian hero. The point of connection between the two is the multiple ways in which we experience bondage. On the one hand, bondage is the unjust deprivation of freedom by those who are themselves trapped in sin, symbolised by the cruel torturing of the chained bear. On the other hand, the fierceness of spirit represented by the bear in heroic literature will eventually lead the sufferer to overcome his own bondage and in so doing impose justice on the sinful, who are in turn beast-like in their savagery. The complexity with which the poet examines the nature of bondage is skillfully achieved through the complexity with which he relates the episode using vivid symbolic imagery and multiple perspectives. What may appear at first to be inconsistencies in his representation of the battle scene are not the result of imperfectly integrated interpolations or even acceptable variations within oral traditional discourse. Rather, the poet consciously sacrifices any claim to be providing an authoritative historical account of Havelok’s life and instead recognises the fallibility of oral discourse and marshalling it to unlock the truth of the story whatever its historical inconsistencies. For this, his choice to adopt the style of an oral performer is a stroke of genius, one with which he strikingly anticipates the questions about truth and meaning Chaucer asks of us nearly a century later.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The oral style of the poem is discussed extensively by Kabir and Bradbury (1993; 1998, ch. 2).

<sup>2</sup> The episode occurs in lines 3297-3494 of *Richars li Biaus*.

<sup>3</sup> Other significant Christ images are the blood running down Havelok's side (1851-52), his three wounds (side, arm, and thigh, 1985f.), and possibly the burgesses' oath that Havelok has been protected by God. (2023-24).

<sup>4</sup> The only image I know of which portrays Christ with the seven deadly sins is Hieronymus Bosch's *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins*, which shows Christ surrounded by the sins in the form of genre scenes from daily life. The Christ figure is accompanied by a banner reading "Cave, cave, dominus videt" ("Beware, beware, God sees you"). According to Schüßler, the motif was apparently known in England during the fourteenth century, as shown by a fresco formerly in Ingatestone Church, Essex, which depicts the eye of God surrounded by the seven deadly sins (136). I am grateful to Professor Gernot Wieland for calling this article to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of Havelok as a "secular Christian hero," see Smithers (lxii).

<sup>6</sup> In the Anglo-Norman versions Argentille has a dream in which Haveloc is menaced by a bear and many foxes, which are attacked by boars. Bell interprets this as representing the conflict between Gunter of Denmark and Arthur of Britain (*Le Lai d'Haveloc* 47-48), but this is unlikely to have been the origin of the bear images in the Middle English poem, since Argentille's dream is omitted and a new one given to Havelok. Possibly the poet made the changes deliberately but decided to use the animal imagery in the original dream for his own purposes.

<sup>7</sup> The fuller accounts of bear-baiting are better recorded later in history. For instance, Robert Laneham portrays a famous bear-baiting spectacle before Elizabeth I in 1575 as a legalistic debate and describes the pleasure in the "fors & experiens" of the bear in avoiding the assault (Furnivall, 17). The same curiosity about the bear's abilities seems to underlie James I's attempt in 1609 to test a bear against a lion in combat (Onions 432).

<sup>8</sup> The word is not well attested and, according to the *OED*, was reanalysed in the sixteenth century as "bear-herd." The bestiary portrayed the bear as giving birth to deformed cubs who had

to be licked into shape by their mothers (Barber 58-60), but the Havelok-poet, however, does not seem to draw on this notion.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also Gloucester's "I am tied to the stake and I must stand the course" in *King Lear* 3.7.53. The bear was frequently chained to a stake, an image adopted as the badge of the earls of Warwick. Although the bear is sometimes linked allegorically to the earls of Warwick in the fourteenth century ( "Ther Is a Busche That Is Forgrowe" (25-30), Gower's *Chronica Tripartita* (4.14)), it seems unlikely that this is the Havelok-poet's intent, especially as the first known use of the bear image by an earl of Warwick occurs on the tomb of Thomas Beauchamp, who died in 1369 (Warwick 1: 98).

<sup>10</sup> The poet later includes bull- and boar-baiting amongst the entertainments the Danes partake in when they discover Havelok's identity (2331-32), but they do not engage in bear-baiting, perhaps because the poet recalls his earlier use of the image.

<sup>11</sup> The first element is unlikely to have been perceived by the poet as deriving from Old English *bearn* "child, offspring," which normally became *barn* (cf. *kradel-barnes*, 1913). Havelok's lament that he was ever a "kinges bern" in line 571 is thus a puzzling form; even in the south it would have been archaic by the late thirteenth century (cf. OED, *bairn*). More than likely, it is a bit of poetic licence, since it rhymes with *ern* "eagle," which retained a pronunciation with a mid front vowel much later, even in the north. It is notable that Havelok goes on to wish harm upon Godard in the form of a "grip or ern, / Leoun or wlf, wluine or bere" (572-73). The close association of *bern* and *bere* is thus established early on, and, ironically, Havelok is the "bear" who ends up bringing about Godard's destruction.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard's orders to guard Havelok from harm may seem at odds with the bereward's job of keeping the bear captive, but the role also seems to have involved the protection of the bear; see Shakespeare, 2 *Henry VI* 5.1.209-11: "And from thy burgonet I'll rend thy bear, / And tread it under foot with all contempt, / Despite the bear'ard that protects the bear."

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the French term *Brun*, *Bruin*, used to refer to the bear character in the *Roman de Renard*. Old Norse *bjorn* seems to have a similar association with "brown" (*Altnordische etymologisches Wörterbuch*). According to Smithers, the word first appears as an English surname in London documents of c. 1319 for one *William Broun* (lxi).

<sup>14</sup> The derivation of *berserkr* from “bare-shirt” is less likely (*Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*).

<sup>15</sup> A version of this story also appears in the mid twelfth-century *Gesta Herewardi* written at Ely, which describes Hereward’s slaying of a bear with human attributes, “ad fabulam Danorum” (“according to the legends of the Danes”) (Hardy and Martin 1: 343-44).

<sup>16</sup> For earlier evidence of the possible currency of Anglo-Scandinavian traditions about bone throwing in Laȝamon’s *Brut*, see Frankis 102-103. It is also possible that the Havelok-poet’s “Wit þe barre so he him grette / Bifor þe heued þat þe rith eye / Vt of þe hole made he fleye” (1813-15) was inspired by the verse-line *auga er ór hæfði*, “the eye is out of the head,” recited by King Adils of Sweden when he treacherously attacks King Hrólfr and his champions (Slay 93, Byock 59).

<sup>17</sup> Smithers finds that the byname of William Wendut was apparently a surname by the 1360s and occurs earlier in William of Canterbury’s *Miracula S. Thomae* (c. 1171) as the name of a mariner (lx). The source of Robert þe Rede is unknown, and Smithers speculates that the byname (along with that of Hugh Raven) refers to the colour of his hair (lx).

<sup>18</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the adoption of the name Goldeburgh, which also first appears in the *Anglo-Norman Prose Brut*, replaced Argentille at the same time as the adoption of Birkabeyn and for similar reasons, historiographical ones which were not the immediate concern of the Havelok-poet. For the names of the other female characters, see Smithers lxx-lxxi.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of the relevance of Margaret’s death and Scottish affairs in general, see Stuart 362-64.

<sup>20</sup> Smithers offers a different explanation for the appearance of Birkabeyn in the *Anglo-Norman Prose Brut*; he suggests that the scribe may have adopted the name from the extant *Havelok the Dane*, which would have become available in the intervening period between 1272 and 1300 (xxvi).

<sup>21</sup> Scott points out that the poet uses “dog” for the thieves but “hound” for Havelok, since the latter term is only rarely used in a derogatory sense (157-58).

<sup>22</sup> The “gripes” who carry off the dead by the hair (1925) probably refer to vultures, but the alternative meaning “griffin” may be intended as an ironic pun on the name Griffin, the leader of the thieves.

<sup>23</sup> Ubbe's later reference to the coming of "bynderes" at night (2048) may invoke the language of nightmares or other night-time distortions of the truth.

<sup>24</sup> For references to bondage elsewhere in the poem, see Scott 145-48.

<sup>25</sup> Smithers interprets Ubbe's curious term "bynderes" as "burglars who tie up victims"; see the entry for this term in his glossary. The word may be intended as a translation of Gaimar's *bricuns* (556), from *briche*, "trap, fetter," ultimately connected with the word "brigand."

<sup>26</sup> *Crus* is defined as "fierce, grim, bold" by the *Middle English Dictionary*, but, as it occurs in the expression *crus to sinne* "eager to sin," I follow Smithers' glossary translation "mettlesome" in assuming that the adjective implies intent to do wrong.

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