The Audience of The Faerie Queene

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The romance form, used by Sidney and Spenser,¹ had an aristocratic origin and continued to advocate aristocratic values in the sixteenth century. Sidney, himself an aristocrat, writes the New Arcadia for such an audience and stresses the duels and tournament-pageants that marked courtly life.² Spenser tells Raleigh that he has designed The Faerie Queene “to fashion a gentleman or noble person” (2: 485). One can argue that he thus emulates the courtesy books (see Whigham 1–31) and, like Sidney, pays due attention to duels and jousts. In the words of Richard McCoy, The Faerie Queene celebrates “the chivalric glory of a militant aristocracy” (127). I will argue, however, that the romance form, especially in England, had traditionally appealed to commercial-class as well as aristocratic interests. Merchants, Londoners, and also country people read romance, and Spenser himself came from an urban commercial-class background, though at its poorer end.³ Scholars have long known that the middling sort of people loved romances, though recent critics, more interested in Elizabeth’s court, have not discussed the matter.⁴ Some review of the facts, then, is in order.

Before printing, chivalric romance was the favorite fiction for all social levels.⁵ In The Canterbury Tales, for example, while the Knight and Squire tell romances, so do the urban Chaucer and the Wife of Bath. The English metrical romance, which Chaucer parodies in “Sir Thopas” and which some have claimed gave Spenser the ground plot for The Faerie Queene, had served a popular audience that could not read French.

The printing press itself did not change this situation. While Caxton, the first printer, appealed exclusively to the aristocracy and the wealthy by publishing romances in expensive folio volumes (Crane 2–4), his successor, Wynkyn de Worde, geared his books to readers of the

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other classes, and later printers followed his lead, publishing romances in cheap quartos, which circulated widely (Crane 23; Wright 375–76). In this respect the medieval tradition held. At the end of the century the draper, Anthony Munday, carried the trend further, dividing his translation of *Palmerin de Oliva* into parts, so he could sell each section cheaply. Buying one, the purchaser would want the rest, so even the poorest apprentice could buy fiction on the installment plan.

The trend affected more than the London middling sort. Town and country folk liked the old romances. One writer recalls Christmas nights in the country, saying:

> We use certaine Christmas games very propper, & [sic] of much agilitie; wee want not also pleasant mad headed knaves, that bee properly learned, and will reade in diverse pleasant bookees and good Authors: As Sir Guy of Warwicke, the foure Sonnes of Amon . . . and many other excellent writers both witty and pleaasunt. (*The English Courtier and Country-gentleman* [1579] qtd. in Crane 24)

Henry Parrot, writing in 1615, said that the farmer comes to a bookstall looking for Arthur, Bevis, and Guy of Warwick (*The Mastive, or Young-Whelpe of the Olde-Dogge*, cited in Wright 95–96). Captain Cox, a prosperous mason at Coventry, had a library that included King Arthur (presumably in Malory's version), *Huon of Bordeaux*, *The Four Sons of Aymon*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *The Squire of Low Degree* (Wright 83–84). Margaret Spufford, in fact, complains that print, in freezing romance, destroyed the oral culture of the lower classes (13–14). The trend grew later in the sixteenth century, and the great period of composition and translation of romances coincided with the composition of *The Faerie Queene* (Wright 382). The whole chivalric vogue continued, however, into the 1680s (Spufford 145).

In the sixteenth century, it was the aristocracy that proved fickle readers of the vernacular romances, not other people. Initially, it was the humanists who persuaded lords and ladies to stop reading romances. Erasmus dismissed them as "fabulae stultae et aniles" (foolish old wives' tales), and Vives followed his lead (Crane 11–12). Protestant humanists like Tyndale and Ascham repeated such arguments and also rejected romances as papist (Crane 12–13). Vernacular romance, however, experienced a brief revival at Elizabeth's court in the 1570s, the years