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Middle English romance, the most popular secular genre in late medieval England, is often considered a genre of adaptation and imitation. Stories, themes, and plot devices are recycled and reimagined in different periods and different languages. The *Octavian* romance, popular throughout Europe in a variety of languages, including Italian, Danish, Dutch, German, Icelandic and Polish, is a perfect example of the way medieval romance developed during the Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century, surviving in a number of prose forms. The romance is important both for its representation of a typical Middle English romance, and for its specific treatment of themes of class and social mobility and religious difference.

The source for the English versions of the romance is an Old French romance composed in the mid-thirteenth century of which we have one surviving copy in Anglo-Norman in an early fourteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 100). In England, two distinct versions of the romance emerged in the mid-fourteenth century, commonly referred to as the Northern and Southern *Octavian*. The Northern *Octavian* hails from the East Midlands or Yorkshire, is formed of six-line stanzas rhyming aabab, and survives in two fifteenth-century manuscripts – Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library Thornton MS 91 (1430–40), fols. 98v–109r and Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 2.38 (c. 1450), fols. 90r–101v – and one incomplete print version: San Marino, Huntington Library 14615 (STC 18779). London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1504–06. The Southern *Octavian* was composed in south-east England, consists of tail-rhyme stanzas of twelve lines, and survives in one fifteenth-century manuscript, London, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60), fols. 22v–35r.

The Northern and Southern *Octavian* romances differ considerably in style, structure, and plot, with the Northern *Octavian* possibly the more popular at the time as it survives in more copies and was printed in the early sixteenth century, as Hudson points out in the introduction to her edition of the romance (Hudson 2006). It has been suggested that the Southern *Octavian* could have been written by Thomas Chestre (see Mills, 1962). The Southern *Octavian*, also referred to as *Octovian Imperator*, has received far less post-medieval attention as “a simple retelling written for a rather indiscriminating audience” (Mehl, 1967, p. 118).

The *Octavian* story features many typical romance motifs, including a calumniated queen, a family torn apart and reunited, tournaments, giants, battling Saracens, and a love story. It draws motifs from three story cycles or traditions: Constance (evident in other Middle English romances such as *Emaré* or Chaucer’s ‘Man of Law’s Tale’); Crescentia (seen in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*); and Eustace, derived from the hagiographical *vita* of St Eustace (which form the basis of the romance *Sir Isumbras*) (McSparren, 1986).

The romance begins with the longed-for birth of twin sons to Octavian, Emperor of Rome and his wife. The Emperor is overjoyed, but his happiness quickly turns to anger as, through the plotting of his mother, he falsely believes his wife to be adulterous. Bursting into her bedroom, he beheads the male servant that mother has bribed to climb into bed with the sleeping and unaware Empress, throwing the bloody head at his now awake and distressed wife. Unable to condemn his wife and children to their allotted punishment of burning, the Emperor exiles all three of them.

Wandering in the forest, the Empress becomes lost and her two children are kidnapped. The first is captured by a griffin, then a lioness, who suckles the child. Rediscovering the lioness and her child, the Empress, her son, and the lioness set sail for the Holy Land. Mother and son travel to Jerusalem where they are greeted by the Christian ruler and the child is baptised Octavian after his father. The second child, Florent, is kidnapped by an ape and then found by a knight and outlaws respectively, who eventually sell the child to Clement, a Parisian merchant. Clement and his wife raise Florent as their own child, although it becomes evident through several comic scenes in which Florent displays his lack of mercantile nous by exchanging two valuable oxen for a falcon and paying over the odds for a horse, that Florent is of noble birth and not, therefore, their son.

When Florent is grown, France is besieged by Saracens, who camp on the outskirts of Paris. Marsabelle, the daughter of the Saracen Sultan, writes to the King of France for permission to reside at Montmartre so she can watch the English knights ride. Amongst the Saracen host is a giant, whom Marsabelle agrees to kiss if he can bring her the head of the King of France. The giant attacks Paris but Florent, dressed in Clement's rusty armour, kills him. Florent cuts off the giant's head and rides to Montmartre where he presents it to Marsabelle, claiming from her the kiss she had earlier promised to the giant. He then attempts to abduct Marsabelle, lifting her over his saddle, but is forced to release her as an outcry rises in the town. Marsabelle returns to her father's camp, where the Sultan is incensed by Florent's actions, assuring his daughter that she will be revenged. Marsabelle, however, confides in her maid that she has fallen in love with Florent and wishes that he would come to abduct her. Meanwhile, Florent returns to Paris and is knighted at a feast where his true parentage is revealed.

Riding near the Saracen camp one day, Florent spies Marsabelle walking by the riverside and crosses the river on his horse to speak with her. Marsabelle tells him of her plan for how Florent should abduct her and about her father's best horse which Clement, in disguise, steals from the Saracens. The next day Florent enacts Marsabelle's plan, carrying her to Paris, but his absence from the battlefield means that the Emperor Octavian and the King of France are captured as they defend France from Saracen attack. Florent tries to rescue them but fails and all the Christians are imprisoned. Word of their capture reaches Jerusalem and the young Octavian decides to rescue his father. He and his mother travel to France with an army, ambush the Saracens, and defeat them. Octavian rescues the prisoners and reveals his identity, reuniting the joyful family. Marsabelle is christened and marries Florent. They all return to Rome.

Octavian was a popular romance in the late Middle Ages, but it has enjoyed less critical attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Work on *Octavian* has tended to focus on the textual transmission of the romance, especially the differences between the Northern and Southern versions, and the romance's representation of social position and mobility. It has been suggested that the development of the romance from Old French to the two distinct Middle English versions is indicative of changing audience tastes (Bamberg, 1990) and social contexts (Simons, 1991), with a new emphasis on social mobility and status indicative of the class consciousness and ambitions of mercantile and bourgeois audiences in late medieval England. Others have explored the relationship of the romance to other medieval genres, namely *chansons de geste* and *fabliaux*. In the introduction to her edition of the romance Frances McSparren notes that the survival of a longer French version of the romance *Florent et Octavian de Rome*, suggests a lost twelfth-century *chanson de geste* source (1986, p. 40). Research relating to the romance's exposition of class and social mobility has centred on the burgher character of Clement, Florent's adoptive father. It has been argued that his inclusion (and of the familial plot with Florent) is indicative of aristocratic anxieties about upward social mobility for those they considered beneath them (Moffat, 1994).

The romance's treatment of women and presentation of Saracens has received less critical attention. Nola Bamberry's 1990 article focused on the reshaping of the text from Old French through Anglo-Norman to Middle English, and the concurrent reduction in female agency as women were displaced as the protagonists of the romance and re-presented as enablers of the patriarchal succession. A decade later, David Salter (2002) considered the peripheral figure of the Empress in *Octavian*, arguing for a more positive interpretation of her silence as a demonstration of motherly selflessness. The two themes of gender and religion are connected in the figure of Marsabelle, the Saracen princess and love interest to Florent. In 2016, Burge's work on *Octavian* explored the motif of abduction and its relationship to female agency. *Octavian* seems to present its audience with stock Saracens – the presence of a Saracen giant (a figure present in other Middle English romances such as *Bevis of Hampton*, *Roland and Vernagu* and *Libeaus Desconus*), they speak a different language – and contains a conversion motif when the Saracen princess converts in order to marry Florent. The themes of Saracens and women combine in the figure of Marsabelle for whom there is some evidence of the "wooing woman" motif (Weiss, 1991); she is afforded unusual agency in arranging her abduction by Florent (what might be called a "romance abduction") but after she is baptised and brought to Rome (i.e. once she becomes a Christian) her role is diminished and she does not speak further.

Critical editions

There are several critical editions of the Northern *Octavian* and one critical edition of the Southern *Octavian*. The most comprehensive is Frances McSparran's Early English Text Society edition *Octavian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986). This edition offers a parallel edition of the versions of Northern *Octavian* in Cambridge ff.2.38 and Lincoln 91, with Huntingdon presented as an appendix, as well as a comprehensive introduction detailing the romance's sources, transmission, and language. Maldwyn Mill's *Six Middle English Romances* (London: Dent, 1973) includes an accessible edition of the Northern *Octavian* from Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 2.38 (pp. 75-124), and Harriet Hudson's edition available online uses Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library Thornton MS 91 as its base text, substituting missing lines from Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 2.38 ("Octavian", *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006)). The text of the Southern *Octavian* has been edited from London, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii by McSparran (*Octavian Imperator* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1979)). The only modern edition of the French version of the romance, from the extant Anglo-Norman manuscript, is Karl Gustav Vollmöller's *Octavian: altfranzösischer roman nach der Oxforder Handschrift Bodl. Hatton 100* (Heilbronn: Gebr Henninger, 1883).

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