

From the Roberta L. Krueger, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1-9.

This extract corresponds to pages 1-6.

The essays in this volume analyze critical features of what is arguably the most influential and enduring secular literary genre of the European Middle Ages. The story of medieval romance's evolution is one of translation and transformation, adaptation and refashioning, and fertile intertextual and intercultural exchange among the linguistic and political entities of medieval Europe. Medieval romance narratives astound the modern reader by their broad circulation in France, Germany, England, The Netherlands, Italy, Scandinavia, Portugal, Greece and Spain, and by the many stories, characters, themes, and motifs they hold in common. These fictions continue to intrigue modern audiences as they undoubtedly did medieval ones by the diversity of their forms and subject-matter, the complexity of their narrative strategies and perspectives, and the many critical responses they invite.

Romance's history is integrally bound up with the creation of elite lay culture in courts and wealthy households throughout the European Middle Ages. However, romance narratives are rarely simple reflections of courtly ideals. Romances of all national origins are remarkable for their authors' capacity to remake their shared stories anew in different contexts and to reposition their ethical systems as they respond to particular audiences, in distinct geographic locations and social contexts often with a critical perspective that calls social ideals or practices into question. The *Companion to Medieval Romance* is intended as an introduction to the voyages, transformations, and interrogations of romance as its fictions travel within and between the linguistic, geo-political, and social boundaries of Europe from 1150 to 1600.

The term "romance" used today to refer to the narratives of chivalric adventures that were first encountered in medieval courts derives from the Old French expression "mettre en romanz," which means to translate into the vernacular French. Consequently, many kinds of vernacular narratives were dubbed "romans" (and were also sometimes called "contes" [tales] or "estoires" [stories/histories]). These stories shared characteristics with other genres, whose boundaries were fluid rather than fixed. But gradually there emerged at royal and

feudal courts a dynamic network of fictions, written first in verse and then in prose, that recounted the exploits of knights, ladies, and noble families seeking honor, love, and adventure. These narratives did not conform to a single, easily discernible type; rather, they sprang from diverse origins and took a myriad of shapes. Thanks to over one hundred years of scholarship, in which the stories contained within medieval manuscripts have been edited, analyzed, and interpreted – an enterprise that is still ongoing – the genre of medieval romance has come to encompass far more than the celebrated tales of King Arthur. Medieval romances survive in a rich spectrum of narratives whose themes and issues intersect with virtually every aspect of medieval social and cultural life.

The earliest vernacular romances were free translations of Latin epics and chronicles into French, composed in the mid-twelfth century at the Angevin royal court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine in England, where Anglo-Norman, a form of Old French, was the literary language of the elite. Simultaneously or soon afterwards, romance fictions were created at other francophone courts in England and on the Continent. The *Roman de Thebes*, the *Roman d'Eneas*, and Benoit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* were imaginative retellings of Classical epics with distinctive additions: descriptions of extraordinary objects, deeper analyses of sentimental affairs, as well as narratorial interventions. Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155) adapted Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) into a popular vernacular history that disseminated not only the myth of Britain's historical link to Troy through Brutus, Aeneas's grandson, but also the legend of King Arthur, whose Round Table is first mentioned in this romance. Most of these tales telling the "matter of Rome" and the "matter of Britain" were written in rhyming pairs of eight-syllable verses. The lively style of the Old French octosyllabic couplet soon became the preferred mode for clerks who would tell tales of love and adventure to aristocratic audiences in the francophone circles of England and France.

At some point after 1160, a clerk on the Continent, who signed his work "Chretien de Troyes," created a "molt bele conjointure" ("a beautiful conjoining") of fictional elements that was grafted onto a central stock drawn from Arthurian legend. With *Erec et Enide*, the first full-blown Arthurian romance, Chretien initiated a series of stories about Arthur's knights, including those of Lancelot and Perceval. His tales of noble love and chivalric prowess launched a vogue for Arthurian fiction that altered the course of literary history, first, by inspiring a spate of imitations in verse and then by prompting production of the monumental French prose romances, which in turn inspired translations and adaptations throughout Europe. Arthurian romances were not the first vernacular courtly fictions, but their tremendous popularity – in a wide range of linguistic registers, cultural settings, and aesthetic modes – established them as a

major force that other romance authors might choose to imitate, adapt, criticize, or even burlesque, but which they did not often ignore.

At the same time, other early verse narratives, unrelated to Arthurian lore, also sowed the seeds for later cultivation. The legend recounting the adulterous affair between Tristan, nephew of King Mark, and Queen Iseut, which circulated orally in Celtic culture, inspired some of the earliest romance fictions. The Tristan romances of Beroul, composed in France perhaps as early as 1155, and of Thomas in England, written c. 1173, are extant only in fragments today. However, these and other written and oral tales of Tristan and Iseut's tragic love traveled widely in Europe and Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages. Their survival in literary and operatic forms in the present makes the Tristan legend one of the founding romantic myths of European culture.

*Floire et Blancheflor*, a tale of star-crossed lovers and of religious conversion, had a long-lived and multifaceted career in France, Germany, England, Flanders and Holland, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The Latin legend of Apollonius of Tyre, which recounts a harrowing escape from incest and a series of wondrous travels and discoveries, inspired vernacular narrative retellings throughout Europe, as did the antifeminist frame-story of the Seven Sages of Rome. Some romancers, such as Gautier d' Arras in *Eracle*, drew their inspiration not from the Arthurian past, but from distant Byzantium. In another register, the femino-centric *lais* *Fresne* and *Eliduc* of Marie de France were recast into longer narratives that heralded a more "realistic" strain of romances. The framework of biographical romance, which recounts the extraordinary history of an individual or a family, served to tell the stories of exemplary national heroes, for example, in the Middle English *Havelok the Dane*. Romance would continue to provide a mold in which patrons could establish impressive genealogies, as did Jean de Berry for the Lusignan family in Jean d' Arras's *Melusine* (1393), whose serpentine heroine bears marvelous children.

Early verse romances were composed in writing but intended for public reading, and they often display their author's sense of both literary aesthetics and oral performance. Drawing their material from a broad range of sources that included oral folktales, vernacular epics and saints' lives, courtly lyrics, classical Latin literature and contemporary chronicles, romance authors self-consciously blended ancient and contemporary stories into new shapes, created characters who appealed to the sentimental, moral, and political concerns of their audience, and drew attention to their own art as they did so.

The audience for romance in all its guises grew and diversified throughout the Middle Ages. Noble male and female patrons were evidently eager to listen to stories in which their own ideals and anxieties were reflected, often through the clerk's tongue-in-cheek humor, for they commissioned the composition of romances in manuscripts that could be circulated among court and family

members and could be passed along to children or to foreign courts. These might later be recopied or re-adapted in fresh surroundings, in other households, in new linguistic or political terrains. As early as the 1170s, the taste for Anglo-Norman and French romances migrated to nearby German-speaking territories in the area of the lower Rhine. The refashioning of matters French soon became a hallmark of elite culture at the great German courts, as evidenced by authors such as Eilhart von Oberg (*Tristrant*), Heinrich von Veldeke (*Eneide*), and Hartmann von Aue (*Erec*). These romances, in turn, set the stage for a remarkable literary production that includes two of the most celebrated masterpieces of world literature, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. In England, the shift in taste from romances written in French to romances written in Middle English occurred gradually from the mid-thirteenth century onward as the appeal of romance spread to the gentry and to bourgeois readers. In Italy, too, romances first circulated in French (from the 1220s), although, soon after, they were translated into Italian and, then, Italian authors began to compose their own chivalric narratives, with heroes who strongly reflected Italian civic interests.

Spanish romance developed more independently of French courtly models. From the outset, its stories possessed an extra-textual historical dimension that reflected, in part, the Reconquest, the Spanish aristocracy's 700-year struggle against the Moors. The earliest romances, adaptations of the tales of Alexander and Apollonius, were strongly didactic, and Arthurian themes arrived relatively late in Spain (and sometimes through Italian intermediaries). The relative autonomy of Spanish romance from French sources and its tendency to critique courtly conventions may have helped pave the way for the bold initiative of Cervantes, whose sophisticated juxtaposition of romance and realism in *Don Quixote* launched a new literary adventure, that of the European novel.

Despite the precarious conditions of manuscript culture, large numbers of romances have survived. Over 200 romances are extant in French, over 100 in English, over fifty in Spanish, well over fifty in German, and around 100 in Italian, including the *cantari* (short verse narratives composed for singing); each romance is often preserved in multiple manuscripts. Such abundance reflects not only the long-lived appeal of their intriguing stories, but also the protean ability of romance narratives to adapt to the new contexts in which they found themselves transposed. No single social agenda pervades European romance: individual romances had different functions at distinct moments in their countries of origin and adoption, as the essays in this volume will demonstrate.

Medieval secular literature was both a benefactor of and a contributor to the intellectual renaissance that flourished in European courts, schools, and cities, beginning in the twelfth century. Emerging first in royal and ducal circles, the earliest romances espoused the project of *translatio studii*, the translation and

transposition of studies from Greece and Rome to France, and they proudly proclaimed the superior culture of their makers and audiences over the *vilains*, the uncourtly or uninstructed. For an elite minority, romances were a vehicle for the construction of a social code – chivalry – and a mode of sentimental refinement – which some have called “courtly love” – by which noble audiences defined their social identities and justified their privileges, thus reinforcing gender and class distinctions. From the beginning, however, the tension between courtly ideals and social realities was often underscored in the very texts that attempted to mask it. To be sure, the genre includes many texts that boldly celebrate the prowess and independence of knights on horseback, record the glorious past of a family's lineage, or soberly examine the ethical and religious responsibilities of noble men and women. But alongside these, we find ironic romances that poke gentle fun at chivalric pretensions and others that raise voices in opposition to purely secular aristocratic ideals, as do some of the romances centred on the Grail quest.

From the thirteenth century onward, there emerged a new strain of “realistic” romances whose heroes or heroines travel to contemporary towns or cities and devise clever solutions to ordinary problems centered on marriage and the family. Indeed, as romance-writing spread to more modest noble courts and households, and eventually to bourgeois venues, and as tensions increased between the different orders of feudal society with the emergence of new commercial and political interests, chivalric fiction presented itself less as a panel for the advertisement of social ideals than as a forum for the construction and contestation of social identities and values.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, as the resources of noble families were sapped by the Hundred Years War in France and England, after the Black Death had ravaged Europe, and as cultural production moved increasingly from courts to urban centers or bourgeois households, the themes of romance began to outgrow their original, chivalric molds, and their offspring took a variety of new shapes. The advent of print culture, the second Renaissance of Classical learning, the intellectual and political battles of the Reformation, the discovery of a “real” new world, and the busy commerce of merchants, artisans, and other workers whose activities were far removed from courts and tournaments – these changes demanded new forms. What was once the new literature for a young noble society in effervescent transformation was discarded as the vestige of a class whose privileges were perceived, by some, as beginning to outlive their social utility.

Yet if the forms of chivalric romance gradually changed and faded over time, romance as a mode remained alive within European culture. The great questions posed by romance – about personal and social identity, love and honor, good and evil – were neither resolved nor, at some level, supplanted. Whether in Cervantes's

satire, in Shakespeare's adoption of romance motifs, in the reframing of courtly love plots in Marguerite de Navarre or Madame de Lafayette, in the nineteenth century Arthurian revival, or in the twentieth-century recasting of medieval romance themes in fiction and film, the ethical questions as well as the idealizing spirit of romance have endured.

Contemporary critics have viewed romance as a mode that attempts to embellish social reality and escape from history, as one that explores the sacred mysteries of birth, death, and the quest for identity with secular optimism, or as one that sets up a binary opposition between good and evil to protect an elite society from the "Other." It is commonplace to set the genre of medieval romance against its literary descendant, the modern novel, whose realism and discursive complexity are contrasted with the fantasy and ideological directness of its fictional forebears. The essays in this volume attest to the marvelous events and idealized landscapes of medieval romance, but they also show that individual romances are rooted in their historic contexts, whose problems they do not shrink from confronting with sophisticated and often self-reflexive narratives.