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The Romancing of the Arthurian Story: Chrétien de Troyes

There will be a continuing life for King Arthur as a military commander and national hero in the fourteenth-century alliterative poem of the *Morte Arthure* and in Malory, but the major new development after Geoffrey of Monmouth is the 'romancing' of the Arthurian story that began to be hinted at in Wace.

The transition from national epic to courtly romance is the result of the transplantation of Arthur from England to France. When a story is removed from its nation or people and transplanted into a different culture, it tends to lose its heroic national temper and be made the vehicle for more generally fashionable social concerns. In France, which is where courtly romance grew up, those concerns had to do with love and chivalry, and the society for which it began to cater is one characterized by the emergence of a more leisured aristocracy, with more of a place ostensibly given to women, ideals and codes of ideal behaviour, all of them comprised in the term 'chivalry'. In the English tradition from which he was transplanted, King Arthur himself had a very limited romantic interest: he has no interesting love-affairs either before or after his early marriage. It seems impossible to imagine any being invented for him. So in Arthurian romance he is relegated to the role of, at best, a great king who stays at home while his knights go off on romantic adventures and report back to him, or, at worst, an ineffectual cuckold. Nothing is said of his campaigns against the Saxons and the Romans. Arthurian romance has Arthur's court as its background or point of reference, but it is not about Arthur.

The Chivalric Love-Romance

Romance is the literature of chivalry and exists to reflect, celebrate and confirm the chivalric values by which its primary consumers, the noble or knightly class, live or purport to live. It does not record their way of life so much as how they would like to think of themselves and be thought of as living, without the frustrations and expediencies of real life. Romance purges life of impurities and presents chivalry in heightened and idealized form. Northern France in the late twelfth century – the society of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne and the clerk-poet Chrétien de Troyes, leisured, wealthy, sophisticated, woman-orientated, culturally ambitious – is the most exciting venue for the new romance, but the great cities of the late Hohenstaufen Empire are not far behind.

The nature of romance may be seen clearly from a comparison with epic, which is the literature of the more warlike and male-centred society that dominated in western Europe until the twelfth century. Heroic stories such as that of King Arthur are the celebration of the values of this society, most of which have to do with fighting. The setting is historical or quasi-historical; the events and persons are assumed to be real as well as important. The central realities of heroic literature are not love or honour but loyalty to one's kin or leader, revenge, and the imperative necessity of asserting self (especially self as embodying a nation or people) through acts of power. Women are important in epic because of their essential role in the action, as part of the urging towards power, possession and revenge which are the source of action, not as ideals or as objects of adoration. Men fight for them because if they don't the women will be killed, raped or otherwise forced into subjection, not because they will be upset.

Romance, by contrast, deals in adventure, not survival. The hero is not desperately defending his homeland but chooses to go out from a secure bastion of wealth and privilege (such as the Arthurian court) to seek adventures in which the values of chivalry and service to ladies (not only being in love but 'being a lover', a social grace as much as a private emotion) will be submitted to test and proved. 'The series of adventures', as Auerbach puts it, 'is thus raised to the status of a fixed and graduated test of election; it becomes the basis of a doctrine of personal perfection'.[1] Courage is still important, but now

in the service of an ideal code of values, not as a necessity for survival: in theory that code could require cowardice of the hero (as in Chrétien's *Lancelot*). The action is no longer 'real' or historical; there are elements of the marvellous; geography is vague; time is unreal. The knight is not impelled by dynastic or territorial ambitions, but chooses to go out on adventures because that is how he proves the values by which he lives – proves his reality, his identity, in fact. Feats of arms, arbitrary in themselves, are the means to self-realization. Action has no exterior real motivation: there is no reason, in Chrétien's *Yvain*, for Laudine's husband to defend the spring, nor for Arthur to ravage the country if it is left undefended. Above all, the hero now thinks and feels as well as acts; there is an inner consciousness to be explored. He is in love.

The new concentration on love in Arthurian romance has to do with new audiences and newly civilized courts; it has also to do with a revolution in the attitude to and representation of sensibility that began in the twelfth century and quickly gathered power – the growth of the idea that human emotion is not a disease of the will nor an enemy of the reason but an attribute to be valued for its potential to inspire nobility of behaviour. It was not a change of sensibility or a reformation of the human heart so much as a change in the cultural opportunities for the representation of sensibility. In secular courtly culture, this change contributed importantly to the new idea that sexual love was a high form of service. The term 'courtly love' is often applied to this new form of love-service, and though it would not do to simplify into a single universal medieval phenomenon a whole range of social and cultural practices which varied by region, by period, by class, by cultural inheritance and in the work of individual writers, it is nevertheless true that the attachment of an exquisite refinement of ideal sentiment to the love of man and woman is the distinctive characteristic feature of medieval chivalric romance. The new element, and what distinguishes *fine amour* ('fine loving') most clearly from other forms of human sexual love, is the belief in the value of sexual love as an intrinsically ennobling experience, in which the lover's aim is not the satisfaction of desire but progress and growth in virtue, merit and worth. It is the male lover that is referred to, of course, since femininity (of which the female person is a cipher) is already constituted as the essence of these qualities.

In truth, though, the character of the new Arthurian love-romance needs little explanation to modern readers, for it has had eight centuries of life to make it familiar. Wherever pre-marital or non-marital sexual love between men and women is represented in fiction, drama, opera or film as the most important experience of life, wherever the love of a man for a woman *paramours* ('in the way of sexual love') is represented as the service of the highest ideal of existence ('love has made me a better man') – that is to say, in the whole tradition of romantic and Romantic poetry and drama and in the whole tradition of the novel of courtship (the dominant mode of the nineteenth-century novel) and its successors in the modern romantic novelette – the inheritance of medieval courtly romance is present. Until recent years, it was the dominant theme and troping device of western secular narrative, lyric and drama. It seemed to be 'the way things were', and the constructedness of this code of love, and particularly the manner in which it privileged the male experience of sexual desire at the same time as it figured him as the servant of the female, has only been fully analysed in recent years, primarily in the work of feminist critics.

The appeal of these romances, as exciting and enigmatic stories of passion and idealism that engage our interest and feelings, is obvious, but they claim our attention also in embodying the social and political attitudes, needs and fears of their authors, patrons and audiences and the class to which they belonged. This is what we shall find throughout the history of Arthurian romance, and Stephen Knight is surely right, in *Arthurian Literature and Society*, in aiming to show how the reshapings over a thousand years of the Arthurian legend are politically and historically embedded in the society of their authors. As he says,

> The texts are potent ideological documents through which both the fears and hopes of the dominant class are realized . . . they reveal under close study just what the ruling forces in each period were worried about and how their cultural support-system was able to deflect and partly to console those worries.[2]

Knight refers to a study of early French Arthurian romance by the French economic historian Georges Duby, in which Duby shows how romance served to resolve tensions between the upper and lower

ranks of household knights, and between barons and king, by offering to unite all in a common idealism (the Round Table is an example).[3] They were a kind of propaganda for the established order. They also offered an idealized account of the way in which the potentially restless group of young landless knights, the *juventes*, excluded from the patrimonial inheritance and yet clearly of gentle birth, could win a fortune by force of arms and marry a rich heiress. That this was no mere escapist fantasy is well demonstrated in the career of an adventurer-knight like William Marshall, in the early thirteenth century, though the account of his life in the romance of *Guillaume le Maréchal* is inevitably somewhat fanciful.

It is sensible to recognize that the 'idealism' of Arthurian romance has its roots in the needs of a particular class and in the conflicts and stresses within that class. In another way, too, French romances serve the purposes of a newly powerful and centralized French monarchy. The glamorizing of a royal court at which barons would attend for long periods, and so be prevented from building up a power-base in their own provincial lands, was very much in the interests of the monarchy (the same technique of control was later used by the Japanese shoguns). One of the striking things about Anglo-Norman romance, that is, the romances written in England in the thirteenth century for the French-speaking English aristocracy, is the almost complete absence of Arthurian themes. The explanation that has been offered is that Arthurian romance, with its image of a strongly centralized monarchy and of Arthur not as *primus inter pares* ('first among equals') but as a divinely endorsed super-king, did not appeal too much to the powerful Anglo-Norman barons.[4] They much preferred to view the king as one of them, raised to high eminence by their assent, and always liable to be called to account, as King John was in 1215. So, by contrast, the corpus of Anglo-Norman romance includes many 'ancestral romances' that create a noble and ancient pedigree for the existing Anglo-Norman families by recounting the noble exploits of a putative founder. In this way a comparatively newly planted aristocracy could assure itself of roots in the country in which they were settled.

Social and economic and political circumstances are important to the understanding of medieval Arthurian romances, but they do not explain everything. The romances have a life as literature which goes far beyond these origins. We should never underestimate the

charismatic power of stories as stories. Stories are precious inheritances; they have powers and meanings that cannot readily be subdued to the imperatives of socio-economic reality. They have a shape which is intrinsically satisfying and they partake of the numinous power of myth. The story of Arthur himself, with its trajectory of rise, flourishing and decline, has such a shape. On a more practical level, one can see the attraction of the Arthurian legend as an infinitely expandable narrative portmanteau. Arthur's court was an extremely convenient all-purpose location for stories of all kinds, and there were, surely, enough knights of the Round Table to provide protagonists for almost any story of adventure. The gravitational pull of Arthur's court is exemplified in extreme form in a very early French poem, perhaps earlier even than Chrétien's *Erec*, the *lai* of *Lanval* by Marie de France, who was writing in England about 1160–80. It is a story of the supernatural, like most of Marie's *lais*, and located in an imaginary narrative realm far to the west of Logres, but Lanval is nevertheless a knight of Arthur's court, and the king plays a part in the action, albeit a weak and indecisive one. He has a queen who accuses Lanval of attempted rape when he rejects her advances (an episode based on the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife), but she is not named, and is unrecognizable as Guenevere.

Chrétien de Troyes

An idealized sexual love was cultivated by the courtly Provençal poets of the early twelfth century, perhaps influenced by the sophisticated Moorish culture of southern Spain, but it was in the late twelfth-century courts of northern France, courts in which powerful ladies like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne were creating a new environment for courtly behavioural display, that these high ideals of love first found full narrative expression, above all in the poetry of Chrétien de Troyes (*c.*1135–*c.*1183), the greatest of the French writers in this mode. Geoffrey of Monmouth gave shape and substance to the story of Arthur, but it was Chrétien who invented Arthurian romance and gave to it a high-toned sensibility, psychological acuteness, wit, irony and delicacy that were never surpassed. Chrétien is self-consciously confident in his appeal to the knowingness and sophistication of his courtly audience, their understanding

of the fine or non-existent line between seriousness and play, as he develops subtle points of love-sentiment, strains the logic of amorous argumentation, and tests the conventionally gendered expectations of behaviour. His poems delight in problems of conduct, especially the problem for the knight-lover of reconciling his chivalric obligations with the imperative of Love, or of mediating between two opposed obligations of honour. In *Lancelot*, for instance, the hero has to debate in his mind between Generosity and Compassion: should he grant the defeated knight mercy, as he must, or kill him as the maiden to whom he has made his promise requests, as he must? His admirable answer to this impossible question is that he will fight him again, this time at a disadvantage, without moving from the spot where he stands (Lancelot, of course, can afford this kind of solution to such a problem, since he always wins). It is a solution to the problem that would have stirred a ripple of applause among the listening audience, and the excitement of these early readings can only be guessed at, with the audience put to many fine debates of 'love-morality' in which women could score as many points as men.

Chrétien's four love-romances – in probable order of composition *Erec et Enide*, *Cligés*, *Lancelot* (*Le Chevalier de la Charrette*) and *Yvain* (*Le Chevalier au Lion*), each of about 7000 lines in octosyllabic verse – are the originals and masterpieces of the form. All have Arthurian settings, as has the other surviving poem attributed to him, the unfinished *Perceval*, or *Le Conte du Graal*, strictly speaking a Grail-romance and not a love-romance.

Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au Lion

Yvain, drawn again from Welsh legend (where Yvain is known as Owein), is perhaps the most fully satisfying of Chrétien's romances: the narrative is bold and compelling as an embodiment of Chrétien's mature reflections on the idealism of love and honour. At the beginning, to an audience comprising Guenevere, who has left Arthur asleep, and a group of knights present at the feast of Pentecost, Calogrenant recounts his defeat at the hands of the Knight of the Storm. Yvain is inspired to take up the adventure and revenge his cousin; he defeats and mortally wounds the Knight, and pursues him to the castle and in through the gate, where his horse is bisected as the portcullis comes down (Yvain's half of the horse is inside at that point). This spectacular episode was a favourite among the manuscript illustrators of the poem, whether or not because they recognized it as a representation of that fear of emasculation which is present in man when power and wealth are sought through a woman.[5] Within the castle, he falls in love with the newly widowed Laudine, and woos and wins her with the help of Lunete, her maid. Arthur arrives with his retinue and after much celebration Yvain departs with them, promising to return in a year. But he forgets his promise, and when he realizes what he has done he runs mad in the woods.

He is healed by a lady, meets with the lion, who serves him in the capacity of a squire and occasional battle-companion, and embarks on a series of adventures in which he re-proves himself as a knight, including the fight with Harpin the giant, the rescue of the three hundred oppressed maidens from the silk-factory at the castle of Pesme Aventure, and the rescue of Lunete. He meets Laudine, but does not acknowledge himself except as 'The Knight of the Lion' and keeps his identity secret until he has fully expiated his crime. This is accomplished when he fights as the champion of the wronged younger sister in a legal dispute against her older sister, who has Gawain as her champion. They fight to exhaustion, finally recognize each other, and in a spectacular contest of magnanimity each claims to have been defeated by the other. Arthur takes matters into his own hands, restores the younger sister's rights to her lands, and Yvain returns happily to Laudine, who has long forgiven him.

Yvain is full of displays of Chrétien's characteristic rhetoric. One of the high operatic moments of the poem is when, in matched scenes,

Yvain soliloquizes, with much balanced rhetoric, upon the hopelessness of loving the widow of the man he has just slain, while Laudine debates with herself whether she can love her husband's slayer. She argues herself into doing what she wants to do by pointing out to herself that Yvain cannot really be blamed since he only acted in self-defence – a touch of the legalism that Chrétien delighted in – and after all, she has a duty to marry the best knight now that her husband is dead, and clearly Yvain is the best knight, since it was he that killed him. In contemporary reality, this swift remarriage would have seemed quite practical: it is the play-acting that makes it so delightfully preposterous. Passages of internal debate like this show Chrétien's quick irony and lightness of touch, which would make embarrassing any temptation to be 'involved' in the characters' feelings in the way we are with private reading and in the novel, but rather serve to keep that 'distance' that is appropriate in reading to an assembled company of men and women.

Another purple passage elaborates the paradox of love and hate in the hearts of Yvain and Gawain when they fight against each other in ignorance of each other's identity. This is one of those rhetorically coloured and heightened pieces of writing that would have had a courtly audience murmuring with delight at the sheer bravado of it, as if they were listening to an operatic coloratura soprano, wondering whether she could bring it off without collapsing into bathos.

There are also characteristic passages in which Chrétien caters for the delight his audience had in hearing about the fashionable sophistication of the society in which they liked to think of themselves as living. An example is the passage where Chrétien describes Laudine's reception of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. She flirts with them all in the fashionably prescribed way, making each one feel that he is in some way special, and yet requiring of each that sophistication and gentlemanly restraint that will recognize that these flirtatious attentions are not signs that she desires to be intimate with them.

> The lady so honoured him and his knights, one and all, that some fool among them might have thought that the favours and attentions she showed them came from love. But we can consider simple-minded those who believe that when a lady is polite to some poor wretch, and makes him happy and embraces him, she's in love with him. (p. 326)

All would feel amusement at this, and a glow of satisfaction at knowing they did not belong among these simple-minded fools.

But these courtly arabesques should not disguise the way Chrétien's romance provides also the testing and confirmation of chivalric values that Auerbach described as the central ethos of the romance-form. Yvain goes mad because in forgetting his promise he lost his truth, and with that he lost his integrity, his identity, his self, his reality. The rest of the poem is the story of his recovery of that truth through acts of selfless valour and concern for others. He relearns how to be a true knight, demonstrating one of the principal powers of romance-narrative, its capacity to show how human beings may be educated and transformed. What began for Yvain as 'mere adventures' has become a more serious kind of self-testing and self-proving.

One of Chrétien's great skills as a romance-writer is that he can talk about serious things without the least hint of solemnity, and central to Yvain's re-education are the intrinsically comical events involving the lion. His rescue of the lion, who is getting the worst of the battle with the dragon, despite knowing that the lion may subsequently attack him, is, as we may put it, his first act of disinterested chivalry after his recovery from madness. A true knight must always intervene on the weaker side, but it was also, we know, with that mysterious knowledge that one has in romances, simply the right thing to do. It is also the lion that brings him to a full recognition of his own loss of love and truth. Yvain accidentally stabs himself with his sword as he falls in a swoon: the lion sees the blood, thinks Yvain is dead, and prepares to die like a true Roman by falling upon the sword. This rare and possibly unique attempt at animal suicide is happily avoided by Yvain's recovery, but to Yvain it is a revelation of what love and truth mean. The whole episode transcends its potential silliness in a remarkable way: the lion is not an emblem of valour or physical prowess, but just the opposite – of Yvain's lost truth, to which he is guided back by the simplicity of the brute beast.

Romances frequently find their truest emblems of true humanity in simple creatures – in animals, in children, in servants. It is no accident that immediately following the incident with the lion, Yvain meets and makes his confession to Lunete, who serves him throughout with truth and true love. He is now given the opportunity of serving her, in the same way, with truth and true love, in rescuing her. We remember how comically awkward it is going to be next day to keep

his time to rescue her when he has so many other people to rescue by 12 o'clock, but keep his time he does and explicitly makes amends for his earlier mistake. We see how far he has come from his earlier commitment to deeds of individual derring-do and revenge, and how he is moving towards the last formal statement of his resumption of his own true identity.

It would detract hardly at all from the moving power of the poem to go back and recognize that the privileging of honour and courtesy and truth over individual prowess and deeds of derring-do is a necessary and self-imposed limitation that contributes to the stability of the newly established chivalric community. In other words, if we ask why 'truth' and 'honour to women' are recommended, it is because it is a way of solidifying marital relations by shaming men into thinking of other ways of winning honour than fighting for themselves as individuals. In closing the rift between himself and Laudine, Yvain can assume a more fully productive relationship with society, as he demonstrates in the long process of winning reconcilement.[6]