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Romance and Reason: Contextualizing the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes

The influence of the stories of King Arthur on the western imagination from the Middle Ages to the present day can hardly be denied, although conceptions of the Arthurian stories have changed significantly since the alleged historical figure of Arthur faded into the mists of history. Written accounts of the Arthurian stories, which we can trace back to the sixth century, changed throughout time, and we can begin to understand the significance of these changes by looking at the work of the twelfth-century poet Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote the earliest Arthurian romances. The romance often involved the adventures of the knight, focusing on the behavior of the knight using the ideals of courtly love and chivalry. We can contextualize the changes in interpretation concerning Chrétien's subject matter by looking at the elements that shaped his narratives, namely, historical sources, the intellectual developments of humanism, and courtly cultural ideals, which include the development of chivalric ideals. I argue that these factors led to a depiction of King Arthur and his court that focused on the individualist quest of his knights, as well as the consequences of the knightly characters' choices, indicating a didactic element to Chrétien's work. I am interested in examining the elements that shaped Chrétien's perspective, particularly as it concerned his definition of chivalry and the proper behavior of knights.

A variety of sources influenced and informed the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Before Chrétien, King Arthur existed in a narrative tradition rich in the obscure past of Celtic Britain. King Arthur was an elusive legend, and as such the stories were easily malleable, which allowed writers inspired by these stories to shape them to suit their own purposes. The beginnings of the

Arthurian stories are founded in the turbulent relationship of the native Britons with the Anglo-Saxon invaders of the fifth and sixth centuries. One of the first writers to record the struggle of the Britons against the invasion of their homeland was a monk named Gildas. He wrote that a heroic leader of Roman heritage named Ambrosius Aurelianus emerged during this time among the Britons and won a battle.[1] In the eighth century, the well-known ecclesiastical historian Bede also discussed a man named Ambrosius Aurelianus, and said "under his leadership the Britons took up arms, challenged their conquerors to battle, and with God's help inflicted a defeat on them."[2]

The name "Ambrosius Aurelianus" became simply "Arthur" when a Welshman called Nennius wrote *The History of the Britons* in the early ninth century. The legend was given further historical prominence when Geoffrey of Monmouth included King Arthur is his *History of the Kings of Britain*, written in the 1130s. Welsh sources impacted Geoffrey's writings about Arthur, but much of the information in the *History* is of his own creation. Geoffrey intended to give Britain national importance by tracing its origins back to the ancient and august past of Troy, and in this account of the history of the Celts, Arthur is a national hero.[3] However, this depiction of Arthur changed when the Arthurian stories traveled to France, and developments also occurred in literary forms during this time.

The epic and the romance were two popular forms of narrative poetry in the Middle Ages, and understanding the difference between them and their different histories helps us contextualize Chrétien's artistic interpretations. The intellectual changes of the twelfth century

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[1] Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and his Work*, trans. Raymond J. Cormier (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), 4.

[2] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price and D.H. Farmer (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 64.

[3] Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 8.

did not significantly affect the nature of the epic.[4] Conversely, in France, where the *chanson de geste* was a popular form of nationalistic expression, the romance came to represent a different set of values for changing high society. These values are intrinsic to the character of Chrétien's work and they stand out in contrast to the epic. The differences between the epic and the romance I would argue reflect the religious, social, and political realities and changes of the twelfth century.

The epic, such as *The Song of Roland,* was a narrative poem that emphasized the obligations of chivalry and war, and usually focused on a larger-than-life hero. Many epics were meant to be read aloud, and they served the important purpose of preserving a nation's history in order to foster a sense of national or regional pride in its warrior class, as well as Christian superiority, which is especially obvious in *Roland*. The language used in this poem indicates a crusader mentality, and is significantly different from that found in the romances of Chrétien. There is also an emphasis on a distinctive chivalric ideal in the epic; unlike the later chivalry celebrated in the romances, the chivalry of the epic is unconcerned with feelings of love and focuses on the relations between male warriors. The world depicted in the epic is centered around a warrior class, and as described by historian Sir Richard Southern, the men who made up this class "were unmoved by the romantic loyalties of the heart."[5] In contrast, female characters feature prominently in the romance, as they are necessary for the development of the knight. Authors of twelfth-century romances still used some of the heroic qualities presented in the epic, such as prowess in battle, but these qualities now served a different purpose.

Besides the changing interpretations of chivalry in literature during this time, the intellectual and social changes occurring in medieval Europe during the twelfth century can help

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[4] W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), 4.
[5] R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 242.

explain the development of the romance. The twelfth century was a time of great intellectual renewal, which resulted in the growth of universities at places such as Oxford, Bologna, and Paris. These academic achievements altered medieval society by encouraging a change in ideals for the secular high classes, as seen in twelfth-century literature. There was also a revival of classical literature and philosophy. Chrétien and other romancers drew inspiration from classical authors, especially Ovid. All of these intellectual changes were essential to the development of medieval humanism.

Humanism is a complex term. Humanists believed that human beings possessed the potential to improve themselves by using their reason as well as by pursuing knowledge. Characteristic of the new ideas about mankind and the natural world, Southern records that one twelfth-century humanist stated that "the dignity of our mind is its capacity to know all things."[6] This belief in man's ability to attain knowledge and advance oneself explains the emphasis on the individual in the humanist tradition. Chrétien is deeply concerned with the individual in his poetry. His knights make choices that demonstrate their individuality, and they must face the consequences of their actions in order to learn and eventually embody certain ideals. The authors of romances did not simply record the accomplishments of great knights; they endeavored to examine the inner lives of their characters.[7] This allowed them to show the psychological conflicts of their characters, usually concerning a moral problem. By depicting the development of a character's moral identity, authors such as Chrétien were attempting to teach their audience about the proper ethical behavior of knights, which shows how humanistic ideas affected the writers of twelfth-century romances.

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[6] Ibid., 40.

[7] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society: The Growth of Ties of Dependence*, trans. L. A. Manyon (New York: Routledge, 1961), 106.

The changing ideals of the medieval nobility reflected in Chrétien's works were a result of a new interpretation of chivalry, and the invention of courtly love. The codes of chivalry and courtly love as depicted in the literature of the twelfth century provided entertainment, and also functioned as examples of proper knightly behavior. Chrétien depicts these codes as often at odds with one another. His poetry shows that knights need to be courtly lovers and chivalrous men in order to attain happiness, and yet his knightly characters struggle to find a synthesis of the two codes. Medieval literature presents historians with information about chivalry, although there were many different ideas about what characterized a chivalrous knight amongst medieval authors.

Generally, the chivalric code specified the proper ethics a knight should observe, and included specific virtues such as courage, physical strength, gallantry, and generosity. Loyalty was also a valued quality in the chivalrous knight, particularly toward a knight's lord or king, and this is connected to the knight's willingness to sacrifice his own life in service. The chivalric code was a way to control the behavior of the knightly class, similar to what the Church attempted to do in the eleventh century with the Peace of God movement. The Church recognized the potential of chivalry and elaborated upon it so that it encompassed the ideal that the chivalrous knight was a warrior who fought for the glory of the Church, as well as for those who could not fight for themselves.

The endeavors of the Church changed ideas about chivalry, as well as the customs of courtliness. Courtliness developed independently, and the nobility probably adopted it from bishops and priests who were versed in classical Roman ideas of virtuous behavior, such as self-discipline and sophisticated social conduct.[8] The nobility was influenced by the clergy's use of

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[8] Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave and Noble: Chivalry and Society in Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 111.

classical sources and began incorporating these ideas into the training of young knights. According to historian Constance Brittain Bouchard, by the 1100s chivalry was thus an intricate combination of "warlike honor, Roman Stoic virtue, court fashion, and Christian morality."[9]

Chrétien's deliberate incorporation of the chivalric code in his poetry suggests that he was attempting to teach a lesson through his writing, as well as to reflect the interests of his audience. The chivalry portrayed in his romances is often unrealistic, especially because much of it is concerned with the fictional convention of courtly love, but it still conveys popular ideas. Medievalist George Duby suggests that romance authors such as Chrétien wrote for an audience made up of *juvenes*, unmarried aristocratic men who travelled around together and took part in regional wars and tournaments.[10] Other historians dispute Duby's claims, but it is apparent that the literature during the late twelfth century depicted a kind of self-perception of the nobility.[11] While Chrétien installed his own ideas regarding knightly virtue into his poetry, especially concerning marriage, he also reflected the ideas of the nobility pertaining to the characteristics that constituted a proper knight, although conversely it may be that many of the ideals of the nobility came from educated clerics who helped articulate these ideals in the first place.

The ideals held by the nobility at this time about the chivalrous and courtly knight conflicted with reality and their social obligations, which probably increased the popularity of these ideals. For example, it was unrealistic to think that a real knight would be able to excel at all of the qualities expected from a worthy knight as presented in the romance, such as to defend the weak and protect the Church.[12] In order to make the idealized knight more believable,

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[9] Ibid.

[10] R.W. Hanning, "The Audience as Co-Creator of the First Chivalric Romances," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 3.

[11] Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2000), 276.

[12] Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave and Noble,* 110.

Chrétien and other poets established an idealized world by placing their stories in the distant past, at a time when they believed that King Arthur reigned and his knights embarked upon quests to test their strength and morality.

Intrinsic to the ideal knight seen in Chrétien's work is the fictional convention of courtly love, a convention influenced by the writings of humanists and of the ancient poet Ovid. Courtly love first appeared in southern France, and it spread to the north through the efforts of women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters, Aelis of Blois and Marie of Champagne.[13] The characteristics of courtly love in literature changed according to place and time, although common elements existed. It was believed that love had rules, and that the lover owed loyalty and devotion to his lady.[14] A manual on courtly love appeared in the late eleventh century titled *The Art of Courtly Love,* and was written by Marie of Champagne's chaplain, Andreas Capellanus. He defines love at the beginning of his treatise as "a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other."[15] Andreas' book is a comprehensive guide to courtly love, explaining the rules of love and providing information for lovers by portraying a variety of scenarios, and we can see that Chrétien shared some of Andreas' beliefs about courtly love.

The qualities of the courtly lover were rooted in the traditions of courtliness. The romances of the twelfth century show that there was a new concern with a knight's behavior in high society. The courtly knight was expected to possess sophistication in dress, manners, and

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[13] Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and his Work*, 8.

[14] Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 7.

[15] Ibid., 28.

language.[16] He was still supposed to be loyal and brave in battle, but he also faced separate duties as a courtly lover. The knight was now required to act with thought to the feelings of noble women. Courtly love originated from the belief that love could inspire a knight to behave in a courteous manner and to improve himself.[17] His love drives him to maintain his chivalric duties, and heightens his prowess as a warrior. Love is also supposed to encourage the knight to behave morally in Chrétien's romances, and this is connected with the important role of women in his poems. The popularity of these ideas in the literature is in part because of the expanding importance of women in feudal society.[18] Women were not only part of the audience of the romances, they were patrons of the poets, and we can assume that they wanted to listen to stories with characters similar to themselves.

Courtly love, as an idealized convention in literature, was generally considered to be incongruous with marriage. Chrétien is unique because he usually deals with love within marriage, perhaps indicating the power of the ideas of the Church on his writing. The courtly love ideal involved service and submission to a woman of high noble birth, actions that were based on the feudal contract. An example of the submission of a knight before his lady can be seen in *Yvain: The Knight of the Lion* when Yvain states "Lady! Truly, no power on earth could be as strong as this which orders me to consent to your will."[19] The knight as a courtly lover in the romance is expected to display submission before his lady because of the inspiration and encouragement she gives him to better himself. The knight's submission is tied to his sense of morality because he knows how to properly act around his lover.

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[16] Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and his Work*, 7.
[17] Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, 22.
[18] Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and his Work,* 7.
[19] Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain: The Knight of the Lion,* trans. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale Universitity Press, 1987), 61.

It is helpful to examine these elements directly in a couple of Chrétien's romances. In *Yvain* and *Erec and Enide,* Chrétien's principal knights must pursue a higher purpose in order to truly fulfill their roles as courtly lovers and knights. This is humanistic because it involves reason and morality. Chrétien's stories about King Arthur's knights entail the search for adventure. The knights undertake quests to test their bravery and values, and the quest is usually depicted as being noble and worthy as long as each knight is following the codes of courtly love and chivalry. Both of the heroic characters in these two poems are different and unique, which is indicative of humanism; however both knights struggle with reconciling love with reason. The knights already possess the talents necessary for being good warriors; however this is not enough to help them carry out their chivalric and courtly love responsibilities. The choices they make throughout the romances show their personalities and values. Violence dominates Chrétien's poetry, reflective of the reality of his time, and thus the customs of chivalry and courtly love seen in the romances are employed to civilize the knight and instruct him to behave in a courteous and moral way in society so that the violence can be controlled.

In conclusion, many different factors influenced Chretien's Arthurian romances. We can contextualize his interpretation of the Arthurian stories by looking at historical sources, including the form of the epic in France, as well as the intellectual developments of humanism and courtly cultural ideals such as chivalry and courtly love. For Chrétien, these factors encouraged him to depict King Arthur and his court in a way that focused on the individualist quest of Arthur's knights, as well as the consequences of his knightly characters' choices. I acknowledge that I have merely scratched the surface of modern research on Chrétien, and I have chosen not to investigate the equivocality and irony that permeates Chrétien's work. However, despite debates concerning his intentions in his poetry, it is likely that Chrétien sought to teach as well as to

entertain, and the ways in which he incorporated the idealized aspects of knighthood into his writing is evidence of his didactic intentions as well as of certain external forces that affected his work. Thus, it is by examining his Arthurian romances that we can gain a better understanding of complex cultural ideas, particularly the chivalric ideal.

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