

Inventing Fin'amor & Chivalry:

Characters of Resistance in Romance Literature of the Middle Ages

Today's popular culture still holds a vestige of the landscape of the Middle Ages. Castles, cathedrals, knights and ladies, are all commonly used images to hark back to the past. The rise in interest in all things medieval that began in the late 19th century established many of the tropes the modern person now associates with the medieval past. As we will discover, many of the artworks that emerged during this reemergence were reflecting popular stories, romance works, that emerged in the late 11th and early 12th century all over Europe, notably in Italy, France, England, Germany and Spain. By looking at these lasting works in terms of how they reconstructed the world around them in an idealised and fictional fashion, we can uncover what medieval people saw as favourable, especially by the virtues possessed by heroes and heroines and the vices possessed by their enemies. By first contextualising romance works by looking at the cultural and social changes that took hold in the 12th century and then analysing examples of courtly ladies and chivalrous knights from romance literature such as: *Erec and Enide* (ca. 1170), *Cliges* (ca. 1176), *(Perceval) The Story of the Grail* (ca. 1176) and *(Lancelot) The Knight of the Cart* (ca. 1177) by Chrétien de Troyes, *La Vita Nuova* (1295) by Dante Alighieri and *The King of Tars* (Written before ca. 1330) as well as artworks representing the same characters from Pre-Raphaelite artworks *God Speed* (1900) by Edmund Blair Leighton and *The Temptation of Sir Percival* (1894) by Arthur Hacker, I hope to prove that romance literature established courtly personas that medieval aristocrats could adopt in order to resist harsh theological reforms that emerged as a result of increased access to heretical texts among the growing literate spheres. These personas embodied the

good morals and behavior that were necessary to be viewed as ethical despite transgressions made to the newest laws and regulations.

One of the catalysts for shifting ideas on love in the Middle Ages that occurred in the 12th century was the emergence of silent reading, which had an impact on writing and reading practices, and led to significant cultural movements as Paul Saenger argues in his book, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading*.¹ He argues that this change in reading and writing practices allowed for the twelfth-century rise in scholasticism and universities, since reading became much faster and reference works became easier to consult.² Copying texts became more efficient, more copies of books became available and universities taught more people to read than ever before. As a result, a newly literate class emerged, the nobility³ Now not only were the top elite able to enjoy romance literature but upper class people with enough money to spend on their own private libraries could as well. Saenger argues silent reading had significant impacts on the culture of the Middle Ages because it permitted for the first time the practice of private reading. Earlier, when reading aloud in a group, any heretical comments or texts would quickly be chastised. Now, readers could explore heretical and even erotic texts free from reprimanding peers. This brought romance texts, and their erotic themes, from elite circles into the private hands of the newly literate aristocratic class.⁴ But with this new access to heretical texts came strict censure from the Church which saw this new reading method as a major threat to their authority.⁵

Just as more people had access to romance texts, the Church propagated new reforms that took on many forms such as: sumptuary laws, which controlled expenditure on what the

¹ Saenger, Paul, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 244-253; 258-273.

² Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading*, 120-123.

³ Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading*, 256-270.

⁴ Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading*, 264-273.

⁵ Reddy, William M., *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asian & Japan, 900-1200 CE*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 77-92.

clergy deemed luxury material goods; new, stricter regulations on marriage and divorce; and the cultivation of a more suppressive view on sexuality to be taught to the masses.⁶ William Reddy argues in his book, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia & Japan, 900-1200 CE*, that as these reforms became increasingly inflexible, a need for resistance grew among the aristocracy, as the customary ways for them to advance socially were hampered by the new laws, regulations, and views about sexual relationships. This is what motivated poets of the 12th century to invent courtly love.⁷ *Fin'amor* was appealing to the nobility in the face of the clergy's harsh reprimands because of the nature of aristocratic sexual partnerships and the role they play in building political familial alliances. For noblewomen in particular, the threat to their rights as ladies that governed property and offices was a major motivator to promote the heroes and heroines of romance poems. By casting these characters as idealized models of a higher form of love, *fin'amor*, nobles were able to justify their sexual relationships that conflicted with the new reforms, such as extramarital affairs, because they were harnessed in by Chivalry, which wore the guise of a righteous code of conduct, becoming the guide that all good noblemen could follow in order to maintain honour and piety. To make use of the romance literature as a form of resistance, aristocrats had only to adopt the persona of one of these idealized characters, the models of *fin'amor* and chivalry, to circumvent criticisms of their traditional ways of life. In what follows, we will explore what characteristics these romance heroes and heroines embody that were necessary for nobles to adopt in order to counter harsh theological views and continue to uphold their customs.

Reading romance works with the context of the times in mind, we can understand who these courtly ladies and chivalrous knights were, and what they represented. These

⁶ Ibid, 77-92.

⁷ Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*, 220.

characters were not meant to authentically portray individuals — that is, true historical knights and ladies, although there are exceptions to this — but instead they represented the idealised courtly persona as imparted by the aristocracy. These personas embodied the morals and code of conduct necessary to combat Church reforms and allow those nobles who were considered more “worldly”, both male and female, to be seen as less morally suspect to these religious authorities. As we look at how these personas are invented and employed throughout romance works, we will see that they represent both *fin’amor* and Chivalry as instruments to cement their virtuousness. To best demonstrate this, we will first examine courtly ladies in terms of how they are represented and what ideals they seem to be promoting in these works, and then we will look to chivalrous knight characters in this same regard.

As the noblewoman’s capacity to govern her lordships, to hold offices, and to retain property were being challenged, she had to find new ways to navigate the increasing number of legislative and social reforms that sought to undermine her. Furthermore, a lady’s consumption was always subject to criticism. Avariciousness and excessive sexual appetite among noblewomen were the primary concern of many sumptuary laws.⁸ Therefore, adopting the persona of the courtly lady, the object of the chivalrous knight’s desire, could remove the aristocratic woman from the same kind of chastisement and legal limitations that she would have otherwise encountered. Henceforth, after taking on this new persona, she becomes the embodiment of love restrained, and in these works her character comes to define her objective, which is to civilize disorderly men, and to convert non-Christians into the faith. To have one’s character associated with virtues such as generosity, moderation, and the capacity

⁸ Burns, Jane E. *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 32.

to incite temperance in others during this time of rigid condemnation of precisely the opposite was pivotal for the self-preservation of an upper class woman.

The first courtly lady that we will discuss is Guinevere, as imagined by Chrétien de Troyes. The most important difference between Chrétien's rendition of Guinevere is that she plays a significant role in the tale. This is in stark contrast to previous tales that feature her, which had up until this twelfth century edition merely only made mention of her as Arthur's wife.⁹ This in itself tells us that the society that commissioned and consumed Chrétien's works, which now included the newly literate aristocratic class, was very different from its predecessors.

In the works of Chrétien de Troyes, Queen Guinevere is portrayed as an exemplary woman. Her virtues are stated openly but are shown as well through her actions. For example, in *Erec and Enide* it is said that she is respected and admired at court especially for her courtliness, kindness, generosity, and ingenuity.¹⁰ In *Cliges*, she is seen by Alexander as merciful, even more so than King Arthur, as seen in this passage: "Out of courtesy Alexander offered and presented his first conquered knights to the queen; he did not want the king to claim them, for he would have had them hanged at once".¹¹ This demonstrates two important things about the queen, firstly that she is merciful, and secondly that she has a certain influence over decisions traditionally made by the king, an empowering characteristic for a woman to possess. Throughout the tales, she is seen giving many tokens, usually clothing, to the various knight's that she admires. This is a testament to her generosity, and to the fact that she is a good judge of character, as she gives tokens only to the most honourable and good knights to ensure their safe return. As Peter Noble writes in "*The Character of Guinevere in*

⁹ Noble, Peter, "The Character of Guinevere in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Jul., 1972), pp. 524-535.

¹⁰ Noble, "The Character of Guinevere in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes", 528.

¹¹ Noble, "The Character of Guinevere in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes", 139.

the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes”, Guinevere’s physical appearance is never actually described. Instead, Noble argues, Chrétien chooses to let the reader cast their individual beauty ideals upon her, establishing her not only as an exemplary courtly lady in morality but also in appearance.¹²

The next courtly lady that we will look at is Beatrice Portinari from *La Vita Nuova* by Dante Alighieri (published in 1295).¹³ What is true about her character is not necessarily the main point of this analysis, although it is known that Beatrice was an upper class woman, married to a banker, and was a devout Christian.¹⁴ What is most important in analysing the character of Beatrice is how Dante chooses to portray her, because it reveals to us what his personal notion of the ideal lady was. What’s more, Dante had only written these love poems for Beatrice after she had already passed away, and, as Dante himself claims, he himself had only met her twice, meaning he knew very little about her true character.¹⁵ Therefore we shall treat her as such here, not as a real figure from history but as a character in a love poem. In the third paragraph of *La Vita Nuova* Dante describes his second encounter with Beatrice, saying that “by her unspeakable courtesy ... she saluted me with so virtuous a bearing that I seemed then and there to behold the very limits of blessedness”.¹⁶ This line tells us that Beatrice, in Dante’s mind, is above all else virtuous and courteous. Despite the fact that Dante is writing about his greatest love, there is no mention of her appearance, and even less his sexual desire for her, at least not in an overt way. Instead he chooses to frame her as the height of civility, polite, proper and having a seemingly incorruptible innocence about her. This he made evident by the clothes she wears, writing “[She] appeared to me dressed all in

¹² Noble, “The Character of Guinevere in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes”, 527-28.

¹³ Alighieri, Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, translated by D. G. Rossetti, ed. by Paolo Milano, (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 547.

¹⁴ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, xvii.

¹⁵ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁶ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 549.

pure white”.¹⁷ This is significant as white is the colour of purity, virginity and innocence in Christian symbolism.¹⁸

The *Vita Nuova* contains multiple love poems about Beatrice, which reveal aspects of her demeanour throughout. It is significant that both Beatrice and Guinevere’s characters are above all else virtuous, meaning they possess restraint, generosity, and it is often implied that neither have the immoderate appetite for material goods and sexual love that were the oft-cited criticisms of other noblewomen.¹⁹ Through their powerful virtuousness these women gained an elevated status, a status that would allow them the capacity to refine men who admired and loved them. This is how *fin’amor* promoted chivalry while also affirming a lady’s exalted place among aristocratic women. As an enlightened religious figure, free from condemnation because of her sincere devotion and power to influence, she rose above the conventional lady who needed constant regulations on her consumption and vices and became the surveyor of her own morals and as a result, was seen as better suited for surveying her own autonomy, at least to the extent that the law permitted. This trait directly impacts the way the personal restraint of these characters are viewed, and if these traits were adopted by a noblewoman it could result in a positive shift in how society judges their ability to self-govern.

These women become defined by their duty to promote chivalrousness in these knights, as we see in figure 1, *God Speed* (1900) by Pre-Raphaelite painter Edmund Blair Leighton.²⁰ In this work we see two figures within the interior walls of a castle. Behind them is a procession of knights on horseback carrying banners through an open portcullis. The

¹⁷ Ibid, 549.

¹⁸ Henderson, Charles. “The Significance of Color in Christian Symbolism” *James Herbert and the Vision Factory*, (September 16, 2004). <https://www.wou.edu/wp/exhibits/files/2015/07/christianity.pdf>

¹⁹ Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed*, 32.

²⁰ Edmund Blair Leighton, *God Speed*, oil on canvas, 1900. Sothebys, (May 10, 2012), figure 1. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/british-irish-art/lot.26.html>

most prominent figure is a lady with fair skin who is wearing a bright yellow dress with shimmering embroidery and an intricate circlet on her head which her golden coloured hair is woven into. The second figure is the knight on which the lady is fastening a bright red cloth.



(Figure 1: *God Speed* by Edmund Blair Leighton, oil on canvas, 1900.)

It is the knight's duty to return this token, and therefore he must ensure his own safety in order to keep his promise to the lady that he will bring it — and himself — back. The knight gazes fixedly at her face lovingly and with admiration for her.²¹ This painting demonstrates the lasting perception of the courtly lady: a beautiful woman who inspires men to do good. In this artwork in particular, she is seen promoting chivalry by inspiring the knight to be brave and courageous in the face of an upcoming battle by her token which ensures her he will come back victorious and safe. The plainness of her dress and the covers on her arms indicate that she is modest and her action of attaching the fabric onto the knight shows her empathy and benevolence. The work clearly communicates the importance of the courtly lady in medieval culture, the object of a knight's affection, whose *fin'amor* inspires men to uphold the chivalric code.

As chivalry was tied to the Christian worldview and code of ethics, a man must first be Christian before he can be the perfect chivalrous knight. We see all types of conversion stories that make this clear emerging throughout the period. Chrétien de Troyes writes about Perceval in (*Perceval*) *The Story of the Grail* as a young boy who grew up ignorant of many things, including knighthood and the complexities of Christianity.²² This we can gather from the following passage, where Perceval encounters knights for the first time: “These are angels I see before me ... My mother did not lie to me when she told me that angels were the most beautiful creatures alive, except God, who is the most beautiful of all. Yet here I see God Almighty in person, I think, for one of them — so help me God — is more than ten times more beautiful than any of the others”.²³ This kind of false idolatry towards the knights is surely meant to give the reader the impression that Perceval's destiny is to become a knight.

²¹ Ibid, figure 1.

²² Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*, in “Arthurian Romances”, Translated by William W. Kibler, 381-494.

²³ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*, 383.

However, this scene can provide us with insight into Perceval's knowledge of the Church, which is only superficial, as he was taught by his mother of the angels and of God but it is clear by his lack of knowledge about the traditional imagery of angels (wings, for example) that we could assume he has had very little contact with the Church proper. Growing up isolated in the woods, perhaps he has never seen the inside of a church, cathedral or monastery. In this way he is presented as a boy already forming, but not quite having perfected, the two fundamental qualities of a knight, faith and courage. An instance in the tale that demonstrates both his lack of faith and instead reinforces his great bravery is when the young Perceval is in the woods and:

“heard but could not see the swiftly advancing knights; he marvelled and said: “... [my mother] instructed me to make the sign of the cross to ward them off, but I scorn her teaching and indeed I won't cross myself; instead, I'll strike the strongest of them at once with one of the javelins I am carrying so that none of the others, I believe, will dare approach me”²⁴.

By disregarding his mother's advice to cross himself and let God protect him and instead choosing to fight, he demonstrates his intrinsic bravery at the expense of faith, demonstrating that he has still things to learn devotionally before he can be a perfected knight.

Later, Perceval is knighted by King Arthur and he becomes an example of how chivalry should dictate all that a knight does, lending credibility to anyone who upholds the code of conduct, because it specifies the ideal practices (as endorsed by the reformers of the time) that Christian men of honour should maintain. When the Pre-Raphaelite artists later painted scenes that included Perceval, they maintained this symbolism of the knight governed

²⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*, 382.

by chivalry as we see in figure 2 *The Temptation of Sir Percival* by Arthur Hacker.²⁵



(Figure 2: *The Temptation of Sir Percival*, oil on canvas, ca. 1895.)

This work depicts Perceval, who is shown with a thin halo, in his suit of armour staring fixedly at his sword which is stuck into the ground forming a cross. Behind him, poised like a cat preparing to attack her prey, is a woman with a dress that is falling off at the shoulder, nearly exposing one of her breasts. Here, the Christian Perceval is being tempted by a visually very carnal woman. She embodies all the characteristics that the courtly lady and *fin'amor* does not condone: untamed sexual desire and seduction as a means towards derailing the knight from his duties. However, Perceval's dedication to his chivalrous duty has made

²⁵ Arthur Hacker, *The Temptation of Sir Percival*, oil on canvas, ca. 1895. Leeds Art Gallery, Figure 2. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-temptation-of-sir-percival-38482>.

him nearly impervious to her feral sexual appetite, he only needs to look to his sword, a symbol of his greater purpose, to withstand her advances. A more extreme example of the Christianization of men through *fin'amor* can be found in the next work, *The King of Tars*.

In *The King of Tars* the pagan ruler of Tars demands that a very devout Christian princess marry him, upon threat of war. To ensure peace in her realm, the princess decides to marry him and they later have a child. When the child is born, it is a deformed mass. The mother and father both believed that their opposing religions cursed the child by their sacrilege, and so a contest of faiths begins to see whose god or gods can save the child. Ultimately, baptism turns the mass into a healthy baby and upon seeing this miracle the King of Tars converts to Christianity.²⁶ This tale demonstrates what a good courtly lady is and is not, She is not a pagan, but a Christian. She keeps her covenant with God, never wavering in her belief. She is loyal to her country, and will sacrifice herself, in this case through marriage, to protect it. Finally, she is powerful because through her sacrifice and unfaltering devotion she is the catalyst by which any man, no matter how ungodly, can become a good Christian. This tale reinforces a difference between the courtly lady of the romances and the aristocratic women of the Middle Ages, which is their faultless faith and their ability to refine men through good Christian morals, as specified by the reformers of the time.

This is how these personifications of men and women as knights and courtly ladies were important tools of resistance and were so successful because of the way they played upon each other. Although scholar Roberta Krueger argues that this tale only appears to give women power when in reality their autonomy is threatened by the theme of honour, I believe

²⁶ Calkin, Siobhain Bly, "Marking Religion on the Body: Saracens, Categorization, and 'The King of Tars'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (Apr., 2005): University of Illinois Press, pp. 219-238.

this passive role is necessary to combat the reforms most effectively.²⁷ The idealized woman had to retain an image of what the clergy saw as feminine because femininity is traditionally subservient and therefore non-threatening. It was imperative that these women not threaten the position of powerful men but only work within the system to create better situations for themselves. This division between women, although problematic and marginalizing, was a necessary part of inventing the idealised woman. The women are just as important in these tales as the men because their strong and influential personality must drive men to follow the chivalric code, which dictates the most honorable and good behaviour. Even in extramarital affairs the women makes the knight into the best possible version of himself, as we see with Queen Guinevere and Lancelot in Chrétien de Troyes *The Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot becomes a courageous and loyal (to a fault) knight, with superhuman strength and drive to protect and serve the royal family, all through his overwhelming love for Guinevere, King Arthur's wife.²⁸ In this poem, although there are many indications of sexual desire between Lancelot and Guinevere, his love for her is more closely related to agapic love, or Christian love, which is distinct from erotic love because it is love for God. There are many instances of symbolic language are used to describe how Lancelot reveres Guinevere as a religious figure, for example, Chrétien writes "He came next to [the bed] of the queen; Lancelot bowed low and adored her, for in no holy relic did he place such faith".²⁹ Later, as Lancelot leaves her bed it is said that "so deep was the pain of parting that getting up was a true martyrdom, and he suffered a martyr's agony" and as he left he "bowed low before the bedchamber, as if he were before an altar".³⁰ This reveals the strong role she plays in making him a steadfast

²⁷ Krueger, Roberta L. *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

²⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)*, in "Arthurian Romances", Translated by William W. Kibler, 207-294.

²⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)*, 264.

³⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)*, 265.

knight as her piousness motivates him to follow the code of chivalry and become completely committed to her protection. In this way, the courtly lady receives the benefit of his services while the knight character is taught to restrict his own behaviour through reverence towards the embodiment of *fin'amor*, the courtly lady. This demonstrates how powerful these character archetypes were because despite their transgression of adulterous sex, these characters are still able to be glorified and idealized. This would become a strong form of resistance if an aristocratic couple could mirror this ability to be above reproach. This is how the chivalric code, inspired by *fin'amor* can restrict conduct while simultaneously allowing nobles to maintain the elements of love relationships that are most important to their social system, including but not limited to extramarital affairs. However this strategy was transparent enough to some reformers, and the social system of the aristocracy was still largely disapproved of by many Church officials. Nevertheless, a number of medieval noblewomen were able to harness this persona and lead very successful personal careers. Women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122 – 1 April 1204), who was Queen of both France and England and later regent under Richard I, her son.³¹ Her career success was largely based on the traditional rules of nobility, especially of annulment and remarriage. And Adela of Blois (ca. 1068 - ca.1122), daughter of William the Conqueror, whose person was described as beautiful, graceful, generous, her chastity unshakable, and with a love for learning and both reading and writing verse.³² She reigned as countess of Blois-Chartres from 1081 to until her husband, Etienne-Henri de Blois-Chartres' death in 1102.³³

Throughout this paper we explored and analysed many romance characters with the aim of demonstrating how they were invented, what they embodied, and ultimately how they

³¹ Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*, 74-76.

³² Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*, 73.

³³ *Ibid*, 73.

became models upon which aristocrats could base themselves in order to secure their customs and lifestyle. Characters such as courtly ladies, the ingredient that makes love into fin'amor through her civility and refinement: Queen Guinevere, Beatrice Portinari, The devout Christian princess in *King of Tars*, and the lady in yellow in *God Speed*. For contrast, we looked to the wild woman in *The Temptation of Sir Percival*. Each of these women possessed traits of piety, generosity, the ability to inspire devotional love similar to Christian love of God and the power to motivate men to follow the chivalric code. Of these men we looked to the legendary knights Lancelot and Perceval, as well as the unlikely hero, the King of Tars. These men demonstrated the virtues of a good Christian man, especially those who follow the chivalric code as imparted to them by a devout woman through fin'amor. Strength, bravery, and unrelenting loyalty characterised the knights. We explored why these character traits were so important by contextualising these works. From the context of the 12th century we know that without the innovation of reading practices, silent reading in particular, there would not have been the rise in literacy that would have allowed for private reading of these romance texts and they likely would not have been disseminated to the noble class until much later in the Middle Ages. However, the privacy afforded by silent reading also meant an increased anxiety among the clergy, who believed this would lead to overconsumption and heretical dissent if nothing was done to restrain it. The Gregorian Reforms, among other monastic reforms and laws, began emerging in the early 12th century to try and curb the general opinion of the public away from avariciousness and impropriety. The virtues these reforms desired to impress on people were the same virtues that made up the characters of romance literature, and so these characters became the idealisation of virtuousness despite the racy plot lines, as we saw in *The Knight of Cart*.

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