



# MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ROMANCE IN CONTEXT

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## **SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE**

*Texts and Contexts* offers clear and accessible introductions to key literary fields. Each book in the series outlines major historical, social, cultural and literary contexts that impact upon its specified area. It engages contemporary responses to selected texts and authors through a variety of exemplary close readings, by exploring the ideas of seminal theorists and/or a range of critical approaches, as well as examining adaptations and afterlives. Readers are encouraged to make connections and ground further independent study through 'Review, Reading and Research' sections at the end of each chapter which offer selected bibliographies, web resources, open and closed questions, discussion topics and pointers for extended research.

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# CONTENTS

Series Editors' Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
<b>PART ONE: CONTEXTS</b>	
Chapter 1: Social and Cultural Context	7
Chapter 2: Literary Context and Material Culture	16
<b>PART TWO: TEXTS</b>	
Chapter 3: Genre and Intertextuality	37
Chapter 4: Scripting Identities: Private and Public Worlds	70
<b>PART THREE: WIDER CONTEXTS</b>	
Chapter 5: Critical Contexts	121
Chapter 6: Afterlives and Adaptations	134
Further Reading	150
Index	159

## INTRODUCTION

What kinds of stories and their authors come to mind when we think of medieval romance? Many of us will have heard of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the exploits of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Some may recognize the names of writers like Malory, Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer, John Gower, Froissart or Machaut perhaps. A few may be aware of romance's intersection with saints' lives, folk and fairy tales, even historiography or chronicles. On the whole, though, a medieval romance tradition consists of a series of largely anonymous works, usually in manuscript form and often held in academic libraries out of the public eye. These texts were gathered into compilations and miscellanies long after they were first written, often for private buyers and collectors and almost all of them with slightly different 'flavours': co-opted for a nationalistic agenda, say, a religious one or simply for ordinary family reading. As such, they all tell us more about the issues and anxieties of a particular time and culture than they do perhaps about their reception when first written. So, too, these manuscripts are subject to the vagaries of time: incomplete, damaged, many of them lost to us altogether.

Yet we know that this was popular fiction with its own cult status just as its afterlives persist today in a variety of forms and media, its motifs, ideas and structures running through a rich and diverse wealth of texts from *Sir Orfeo*, to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Harry Potter*. Romance is a story of origins – not simply a matter of birthright (though we all recognize the archetypal changeling motif) but a consideration of our place in the wider world with its myths, narratives of history, unstable constructions of class, ethnicity and nationhood, and the impulses and effects of colonization. Its focus is on family

drama, kinship patterns, the workings out of gender, ideologies of community, leadership, inheritance, on the tension between public and private, time and space. Its worlds are, at once, concrete, ordinary, highly visual and yet strange with parallel dimensions like faery, its slippages of time and space, a crucial element that I call liminal throughout this volume. Here everyday life is distorted and identities are tried on, tested. This is where the real with all its anxieties and social codes is reconfigured, often into a potential utopia, and always through the same motifs: supernatural events or objects; the doubled or shadow self of the monster; significant places and times; bodies of all kinds, including disaggregated ones or those under threat; secrets and outward appearances; stock figures; trajectories of exile and return; love triangles, rivalry and battle or crisis scenes. And at the core of this capacious, long-lived genre is always a potent mix of love, loss and illicit pleasure.

The structure of this book follows the format for the series. Part One attempts to contextualize English romance stories through a brief outline of some of the social, historical and cultural issues of a late medieval world. It examines, too, literary culture and the material production of its manuscripts. Part Two offers a range of critical readings and approaches to several key texts from an English romance tradition: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Gowther*, *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Emaré* and the *Man of Law's Tale*, and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*.

Part Three begins by discussing some contemporary critical responses to the romance genre, most notably key theorists such as Carolyn Dinshaw, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Patricia Clare Ingham and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It takes in ideas about gender and queer studies, postcolonialism, concepts of history and the place of theory in medieval studies. Later I examine just a few – *Doctor Who* and its spin-offs, the *Batman* films, Simon Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – of the many afterlives and adaptations of this compelling genre.

This guide may be used as a dip-in, reference resource (in which case, see the Contents, Index, final resource pages and navigate via the subheadings in each chapter) and/or read in full. It is not a monograph; hence its discussions and interpretations are not comprehensive. There is no singular through-line of argument, though my inclinations and ideas are, I think, clear and cohesive. Lines of inquiry mesh and compete in equal measure; they falter, peter out, circle in,



## INTRODUCTION

out and around in an attempt to offer starting points, stimulate debate and spark independent research. Similarly, my approach is to track in, out and between extracts and key scenes rather than work a text at a time, in keeping with my focus on the contingent, provisional and profoundly intertextual nature of the romance stories I discuss. Above all, I take a mere handful of the stories of the last 600 or 700 years in an attempt to bear witness to the insistent dialogue between past and present, and to the productive connections between medieval romance and the popular fiction of today.



**PART ONE**

**CONTEXTS**



## CHAPTER 1

# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

## SOCIAL UPHEAVAL

Medieval society is often classified into three estates. After royalty, the most privileged class composed the clergy, nobles and knights. Bottom of the heap was the ‘gentils’ or the commons – anyone from craftsmen and free landholders (sometimes called the bourgeoisie or the emerging middle class) right down to peasants attached, feudal-style, to aristocratic households. At the same time, as with the rest of Europe, the power of the Catholic Church remained all-pervasive. Ecclesiastical courts were separate from civic ones and dealt with matters large and small, from heresy to proscriptions on birth, marriage and death. Church teachings and writings suffused literary and everyday culture. The medieval year was structured by a liturgical calendar full of saints’ days and festivals. Canonical time, with its call to prayer and its bells, measured a medieval ‘working’ day. The Church was also a feudal overlord, owner of more than a third of all land in England upon which it demanded rent and tithes.

Yet the medieval world was far less static than this commonly accepted overview suggests. Internal power struggles and increased criticism of its practices divided the Church and resulted in the Papal Schism of 1378–1417. Religious reformers like John Wyclif and his ‘Lollard’ followers campaigned for a devolvement of power from the priest to ordinary people. On the Continent, a raft of similar movements undermined Church authority and would later prompt a crackdown in the form of the Inquisition. Language became a highly charged issue. In spite of its lack of status as a largely oral form, the vernacular was increasingly the language of choice. Wyclif, for example, demanded bibles written in English so that everyone could access Church teachings.

At the same time, Black Death ravaged Europe and led to profound social and economic change. The first wave of this highly virulent pandemic – probably a mix of pneumonic and bubonic plague – hit England in 1348 to kill at least a third of its entire population. The population of London, for instance, halved to around 50,000. Recent research indicates that in specific villages or parts of England up to three-quarters of its people died. Other outbreaks occurred in 1361–62, 1369 and 1375 with sporadic occurrences across Europe for several hundred years after. Though less severe than the first, these later incidences seemed to target children and adolescents in particular. The result was to intensify social upheaval. Labour was scarce. Some noble families were wiped out and/or their line of inheritance (father to son) disrupted. Birth rate fell. Plague hastened the end of England's feudal system and aggravated social changes already under way. The population shifted from rural to urban areas as people sought improved wages and working conditions and manufacturing trades expanded, with especial demand for English textiles. Labour laws of 1349, 1351 and 1361 attempted to freeze wages at pre-plague levels even as a scarcity of labour made it a workers' market. Laws passed in 1349, 1376 and 1388 made letters of permission from feudal lords a requirement for those trying to leave their villages or manors and refused such migrants charitable aid; many of them were fined for vagrancy. In 1381, in protest against this kind of coercion and the exorbitant poll taxes demanded by Richard II to fund his campaigns against the French and the Scots, rebels marched into London in what is known as the Peasants' Revolt. The protest was quickly crushed but 100 years later there were no more serfs left in England.

Perhaps the most dynamic social group in England in the aftermath of the Black Death was the gentils. The 1379 English poll tax sought to define this amorphous group by subdividing it. The highest consisted of esquires and gentlemen in service or chamber knights in royal service; in other words, those with some money and power or loosely aligned with chivalry in the sense of having access to the king. Lesser categories comprised attorneys, aldermen, sergeants, franklins, merchants, pardoners and summoners: essentially those without land or *inherited* money. The gentils were increasingly influential. Its members were often associated with London and, therefore, centralized government, perhaps via economic links with the court or parliament at Westminster, or through ecclesiastical ties (the Archbishop

of Canterbury, head of the English Church, resided at Lambeth Palace). However, 'gentils' remains a highly charged term perhaps best defined by its status as respectable rather than feudal. Even so, it redefined aristocratic privilege. Yeomen, for example, achieved particular success as strategic bowmen in the Hundred Years War with France. On their return in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, large numbers of them found themselves socially upwardly mobile through their popularity as retainers in noble households. Conversely, many who would previously have been knights in old-style feudal service were now demoted to the lesser ranks of esquire and gentlemen as landowners closed ranks in what was to prove an unsustainable attempt to preserve aristocratic integrity.

Opportunities for social mobility were quickly taken by the gentils who were key players in the transformation of the social face of medieval England. With their increased prosperity, they bought books written in English, and bought or married into land left vacant by failures of dynasty. In this they were aided by a shift in emphasis in canon law, which now preached the importance of individual consent in marriage, proof of sexual consummation and the idea of marriage as a sacrament. Increasingly, the Church ranked these issues alongside older values of kinship and estate, though, in practice, marriage was neither a free choice nor a dynastic, arranged coupling, but somewhere between the two.

## NATIONHOOD AND IDENTITIES

Many people forget that medieval England was also a colony under Norman rule since the conquest of 1066 and struggling to define itself both against, and through, its colonized state. London was a melting-pot of French, Norman-French, Flemish, Italian and other European and eastern diplomats, traders and merchants. Internally, 'Britain' continued to be disputed on its Scottish, Welsh and Irish borders. Within England, the dominance of London as the centre of government and commerce meant that 'outside' – the provinces and the north-west especially – was marginalized. This lack of cohesion was exacerbated by the fact that no common language united medieval England. Its official language was French, used alongside Latin for all legal or administrative documents and correspondence. French was spoken in the royal court. In the provinces, Anglo-Norman French still mingled with a non-standard, multiple-dialect English

vernacular with no real history – and hence authority – of transcription. Yet as a certain consciousness about ‘nation’ began to emerge, the vernacular became the language of choice. Its use called up all kinds of vested political, linguistic and cultural agendas; indeed, at times, it might be said to be a dangerous choice.

Both the crusades and the Hundred Years War contributed to social tensions and emerging ideas about nationhood that feed into medieval romance texts. Edward II’s claim to the duchy of Aquitaine via his mother’s line sparked a war with France that lasted from 1337 to 1453. English successes were numerous to begin with. The French king, Jean II, was captured, for example, and taken to the English court in London where he remained as a ‘guest’ for a number of years. Yet even as the campaign rapidly turned to deadlock and financially crippled the nation, English kings continued to press for the French crown. Edward II assumed the arms and title of ‘King of France’ in 1340. Henry VI crowned himself king of France in 1431 and continued with this spurious title even though by 1453 more or less every inch of French ground had been lost. Aquitaine remained a particular bone of contention, not least because the Gascons who inhabited this corner of Brittany considered themselves separate from the French. They had their own language and culture and were initially receptive to English claims until Richard II passed on the dukedom of the region to an unpopular John of Gaunt in 1390. Political manoeuvring of this kind was a feature of a war that ebbed and flowed, ran parallel with campaigns against the Scots who fought for their own independence and also seemed to have little adverse effect on cross-cultural and literary exchanges between France and England.

Though the crusades began as an attempt to expand and unify the Christian world, by the late Middle Ages its mixed fortunes meant that campaigns were losing support. The 2nd Crusade of 1148 had failed miserably with the crucial loss of the Holy Land and all its treasures. Then Acre fell in 1291. Acre and Jerusalem had been part of a handful of Christian colonies backed by the support of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church in an otherwise largely Islamic east. When crusaders captured and ransacked Constantinople in 1204, its success was tempered by the fact that it hastened the final separation of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in the west (Constantinople had been the headquarters of the Eastern branch of Christianity). The Balkans Crusade of 1395 was



disastrous for Christian forces, especially the French Burgundy dukes who had favoured it. Yet in August 1480 the great siege of Rhodes was lifted; around 3500 Turkish soldiers died. In return, in the same month, the Turks captured Otranto, sacking the city, killing or taking as slaves its inhabitants and destroying Christian churches.

This constant see-saw of power and the huge expense of operations ensured that when, in 1481, Pope Sixtus IV called on all Europe to avenge Otranto the response was measured. The Church had a vested interest in supporting crusades. The Papal Schism of 1378–1417 meant that the Pope's authority as divinely ordained caretaker of Christianity was insecure. First one then two popes were ordained, whilst the Catholic Church's headquarters moved from Rome to Avignon, France. In this context, the Church's eagerness for crusade was a means of reuniting a fragmented Christendom. The Church sold indulgences to raise revenue for professional crusading soldiers. Many countries raised taxes for crusades, especially after the fourteenth century. Yet many powers were reluctant to commit to future campaigns in this period, increasingly viewed as defensive rather than expanding a Christian empire by recapturing Jerusalem. Accordingly, the Church altered its strategy. It encouraged people to offer prayers or financial assistance to crusade armies by declaring that the spiritual rewards for this matched any gained by actual combat. Similarly, it was acceptable to read about crusades in romances or travel writings, for instance.

## EAST AND WEST

On the one hand, then, the crusades were part of a drive to expand and secure the Christian world. Yet they point up, too, an increasing late medieval awareness of emerging national, rather than supra-national, identities. The English kings Richard II, Henry VI, Edward IV and Henry II all assumed the title 'Most Christian King', even as some of them made parallel claims to French soil. 'Nationhood' revolves around matters of difference to mark off religious, racial or ethnic, linguistic, class and geographical borders, none of which is ever secure. The crusades attempted to assert an east–west division in medieval culture that was in fact far more diffuse. As early as the twelfth century, for instance, Almeria in Spain was a locus for east–west commercial transaction. Reputed for its silks and at the heart of