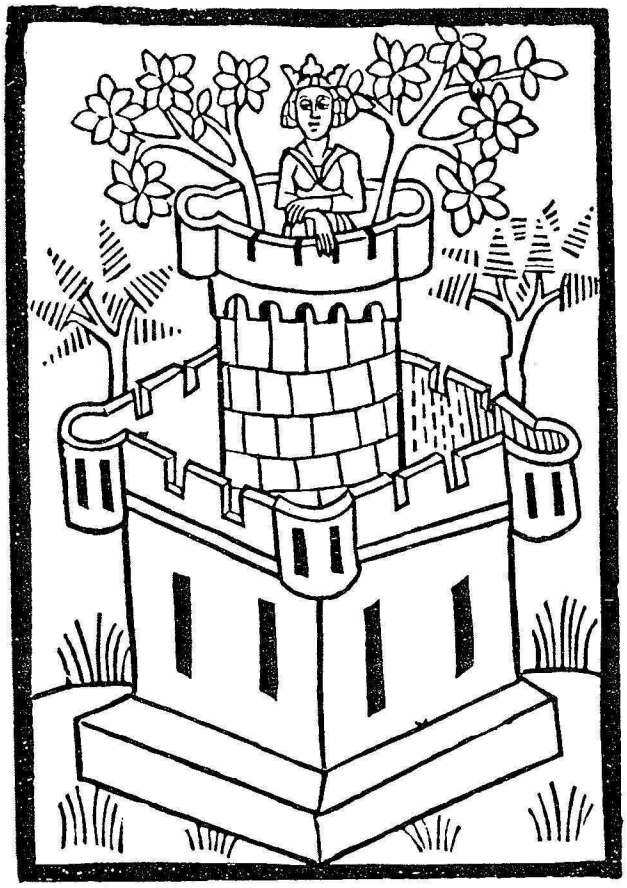
Fays, Floozies and Philosophical Flaws

Arlene Ladden



The smile of my gracious lady makes me happier than if four hundred angels laughed at me from the heavens (Raimbaut d'Orange, while some less gracious ladies chuckled from the wings.)

The attitudes in *True Romances* (and in most of our pasts) originally shone forth from 12th-century troubadour poetry, and even then they were a little tarnished. Chaste, idealistic and upper-class, medieval troubadour poetry supposedly countered a strong tradition of misogyny. It also supposedly elevated woman by upholding that same feminine mystique which, for centuries, the Christian fathers had diligently tried to demolish: "Corporeal beauty is nothing else but phlegm, and blood, and humor, and bile, and the fluid of masticated food. . . ." said John Chrysostom, a saint, in the 4th century. "When you see a rag with any of these things on it, such as phlegm, or spittle, you cannot bear to touch it even with the tips of your fingers. . . . Are you in a flutter of excitement about the storehouses and depositories of these things?"[1]

Woman was so many layers of mucous membrane. And writings from 6 and 7 centuries later attest to the muddy strides saints and clerics had taken in the interim: "If her bowels and flesh were cut open, you would see what filth is covered by her white skin. If a fine crimson cloth covered a pile of foul dung, would anyone be foolish enough to love the dung because of it?"[2] Now, woman was simply so much manure smattered across the coprophagous pages of Christian doctrine.

The wheels of progress kept on turning. A 13th-century work addressed itself specifically to women—three worthy recluses: "What fruit does your flesh yield from all its openings?" began their catechism. "Between the taste of mouth and smell of nose, aren't there holes like two privy holes? Aren't you born of foul slime? Aren't you worm-food?[3] To the Church, woman was simply full of shit. Yet this was the legacy bequeathed to the Middle Ages, where the love of woman was a cult—an absolute prerequisite for respectability. And love flourished.

Of course, misogyny continued to flourish too. Woman would still be called "a stinking rose" and "glittering mud" and "a temple built over a sewer."[4] But, as sister to Mary, she was also the mystical elevator of the masculine soul which, by its nature, gravitated toward perfection. By merely contemplating woman in her golden radiance, man could rise to spiritual heights in a kind of "gilt" by association. For somewhere between the muddy slime and the hazy castle spire, a new woman had been spawned. Like the enchanted fay (fairy) of Celtic lore, she moved softly, gliding over but never touching terra firma, surrounded by auras so fragile that they were better left unpenetrated. But these were beautiful, mysterious and promising auras, and scribes feverishly copied down the formulas for keeping them intact: "If you have ugly teeth, don't laugh with your mouth open." "Practice making pretty speeches." "Dye your hair; wear false hair if you have lost your own. . ."[5]

Andreas Capellanus, Jacques D'Amiens, Robert le Blois, Garin le Brun, Drouart la Vache, Ermangau and de Fournival—all added their instructions to the heap: *Lie. Cheat. Drop names, if you have to. Drop dead, if you have to. Anything.*

Maintaining the mystique was the important thing, and that meant keeping the distance. It meant the ecstasy was in the wooing while sex lay in the winding down. Even the ladies understood that attainment decreased their value, and many who loftily kept their suitors well below thigh level would rather have had it otherwise. After all, as even the ladies knew: a

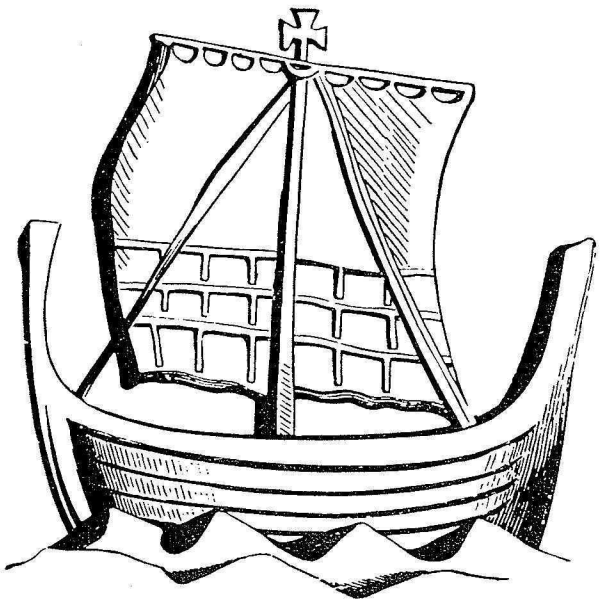
lover is a vision surrounded by auras. But flesh and blood is flesh and blood . . . and phlegm and dung and mucous and bile and etc.

Once woman ceased to be a symbol, she became a person, a passion, a robber of reason —a literal and metaphorical scum-bag.

No wonder the ladies were afraid to submit. With submission, love and its *raison d'être* became the discarded backdrop for a *fait accompli*. The love was no longer ennobling (ergo: the animal soul pawed and dragged down its rational counterpart), and the woman was no longer mounted on a pedestal (ergo: with the man on top, she was mounted, period). And man's desire—well, that often died along with his suffering.

It's natural, then, that the really legendary lovers chose the most distant and unattainable objects they could conceive of. Guilhem de la Tour, for instance, loved the woman he lived with.[6] Now, such women were worn on everyday occasions and were inevitably mundane. But Guilhem's enamorata was unearthly; in fact, she was dead. On the eve of her burial, Guilhem visited her grave and, after ten days of morbid embracing and poignant conversation (she was a good listener), he went home firm in the belief that she would rise from her tomb and come back to him. She didn't. But for years, it was only Beatrix he longed for. She was the perfect lover—mystical, ethereal and unobtrusive. It was a passion that rivaled even Jaufre Rudel's.

Jaufre Rudel was ingenious. In an age which valued prolonged desire, he contrived a wonderful device. He fell in love with the Countess of Tripoli—a woman he had never seen but whose beauty had filled his imagination so enchantingly that southern France became a glorious vantage point. And so it remained for several years until, despite the protests of his friends and patron, he resolved at last to cross the ocean to be near her.



Maybe he just got sick. Or maybe, as his biographers prefer to believe, the anticipation of seeing her was too much for his little heart to bear. In any case, as the boat was approaching Tripoli, he apparently expired. But only apparently. For as the countess rushed to his side, her presence revived him and he pronounced himself fulfilled at last and died again in her arms—a self-extinction metaphorically equivalent to orgasm, but which Jaufre seems to have taken much too literally, since Petrarch and other chroniclers affirm that this time he actually *did* die, and in all probability with his pants on.[7]

True, Jaufre was a strange and nearly legendary breed. But while to him sex must have seemed an unspeakable defilement, most were not so theoretical. Even troubadours who constantly reminded women that sex was debasing and honor was all had an ultimately sensual physicality in mind. Woman was like a fine wine. A man twirls it about, observes its color, its clarity, savoring its bouquet and rolling it around on his languishing taste-buds. And though the swallow is only the means to the end, the end is still very definitely in view. Most pleas for chastity were only lip-service. Even Sordello, a troubadour who repeatedly swore he'd rather die than see a lady even taint her honor, happened to kidnap a Veronese countess and that didn't help her honor a bit. Nor did it discredit his poetry. Such scandal was irrelevant. In fact, women were irrelevant. *Love* was the important thing and the trick was to keep it alive as long as possible, feeding it little by ever-so-little in an extended and delicious tease. Men could nudge at the gates to the ovarian fortress, but entrance, they knew, should be delayed. The ultimate object was sex; men *wanted* what they waited for. They just didn't want it right away. And this largely explains why other men's wives proved such suitable candidates for adoration. Forbidden, illicit, deliciously dangerous—yet slightly damaged, they promised all the more to be ultimately affordable. They were perfectly fashioned for desire.

Desire is a tricky business. In Greece, Plutarch had admired Spartan marriages where, for years, man approached his wife in darkness, in secret and in haste "so as not to be satiated . . . there was still place for unextinguished desire."[8] It was a useful formula and was later picked up in the Middle Ages when the notion of infrequent and clandestine meetings was embraced a lot more than the ladies were. The medieval magic of love was uncertainty. Even the romances preserved this ideal. The lady could be snatched away at any moment by a darkening scandal or a jealous husband, or be absorbed into the ethers which spawned her, disappearing into the mist on a white palfrey. The knight wanted her like that: distant, pure, mysterious, virginal—a blonde Mary ascending into

heaven, looming over the castle horizon with only a little soot on her feet suggesting that she didn't belong there.

Never mind that the only pure-white creature was the post-menopausal albino rabbit—or that even the ladies depicted in romance were potentially swivers of heroic proportions. Since sex distinguished the distant fay from the dung-filled floozy, relatively sexless love became prevalent, and many women—whether they liked it or not—played along.

There were advantages, of course. Love became a rare delicacy whereas before it had been something like yesterday's leftovers. As Ovid's classical formula goes: "Pleasure coming slow is the best";[9] meaning, the longer the foreplay the better the orgasm; meaning, some courtly couples, when they finally did come, must very nearly have blown their brains out.

But some, for sure, were disappointed. Women were dropped, men bumbled like Perceval or —like some knights in the bawdier tales—they'd win their ladies with lots of pomp and peter out before they could even open the package, their worlds ending not with a bang but a whimper. These were particularly grateful for courtly love.

Courtly love was a game of foreplay whose rule was often touch and go; it was an answer (and a spur) to impotence. Some knights were barely post-pubescent and many were sexually insecure, preferring rich expectations to poor reputations and one-night stands. Better to tilt about the countryside, flaunting a passion and flailing a sword (the sword had always been a metaphor for penis—"vagina" is merely Latin for "sheath"), imagining a truly magnificent sexual prowess when the real thing was maybe limp by comparison. Love by its very nature was a test, and knights were afraid to take the exam. Or sometimes, it was better to put it off than to put it in.

Love became formalized. The knight waxed and grew pale, and waxed, and waxed, and waxed. It was blissful and aggrandizing anticipation. Too bad if a lady sometimes felt cheated—if watching her knight charging and gleaming, she secretly wished he'd get off his high horse and get down to business. What could the women do? Their iron-clad men performed in the tournaments. Ramming, sweating, thrusting and galloping. . . . Ah, those impervious men in the metal suits.

. . . The only things naked were their swords.

1. "An Exhortation to Theodore after His Fall," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff et al. (New York, 1889), IX, 103-104.
2. From the *Carmen de Mundi contemptu*, quoted in *Not in God's Image*, ed. J. O'Faolain and L. Martines (New York, Harper and Row, 1973), p. xiii. St. Odo of Cluny had earlier phrased this with almost identical wording in his *Collationes*, lib. 2, cap. 9 (in J. P. Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1844-82), CXXXIII, 556), while *Ancrene Riwle* (below) directly refers to a similar expression in St. Bernard's *Meditationes Piissimae de Cognitione Humanae Conditionis*, cap. 3 (Migne, *op. cit.*, CLXXXIV, 489). The key phrases are "stercoris saccum" and "saccus stercorum"—literally, a bag of shit.
3. The Early English Text Society's *Ancrene Riwle*, ed. E. J. Dobson (London, 1972), pp. 202-203; author's translation.
4. Salimbene, in *From St. Francis to Dante: Translations from the Chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene* (1221-1288), 2nd ed., ed. and trans. G.G. Coulton (London, 1907), p. 97; and Tertullian, quoted in G.L. Simons' *A History of Sex* (London, New English Library, 1970), p. 71.
5. From *La Clef d'amor* and *La Cour d'aimer* in Nina Epton's *Love and the French* (London, 1959), pp. 30ff.
6. For troubadour biographies, I have consulted Jehan de Nostredame, *Les Vies des Plus Célèbres et Anciens Poètes Provencaux*, ed. Camille Chabaneau (1913; rpt. Geneve, 1970—first published in 1575); La Curne de Sainte-Pelaye, *Histoire Littéraire des Troubadours* (1774; rpt. 3 vols. in 1, Genève, 1967); and Victor Balaguer, *Los Trovadores*, 2nd ed. (Madrid, 1883), 4 vols.
7. Jaufre was not the only fatality of romance. Andrieu of France—eulogized by at least six troubadours—also fell victim to "too much love" and he'd never set eyes on his lady either. See Jehan de Nostredame, *op. cit.*, pp. 166, 180.
8. *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Langhorne (London, Frederick Warne, n.d.), IV, 37.
9. Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*, line 405; Rolfe Humphries' translation in *The Art of Love* (Bloomington, 1957), p. 193.

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