

A “Secondary” Genre

Romance was secondary neither in terms of its importance nor in terms of its subsequent destiny. But the epithet may be applied to it in two ways. First of all, chronologically: romance appeared towards the middle of the twelfth century, somewhat later than the *chanson de geste* and lyric poetry, so we can see it develop through all its stages, while the other two genres were fully constituted when they first appeared to us. Second, by reason of its character: from the very beginning romance defined itself as a self-reflexive genre, preoccupied by its own processes, and, therefore, as an intellectualized genre.

The *chanson de geste* and the poetry of the troubadours and trouvères were both intended to be sung. Romance was the first medieval literary genre intended to be read. Read aloud, of course, since the custom of individual reading spread only later. But this trait alone sufficed to make it an entirely new form, especially with regard to the *chanson de geste*, the only narrative genre that had preceded it. It renounced the repetitive fascination of the epic melopoëia, the equally repetitive effects of the echo or refrain born of the formulaic style and the technique of parallel *laisses*, and the stanzaic construction that imposed on the listener both its ruptures and its rhythm. For these it substituted the unlimited linearity, without rupture or shock, of octosyllabic couplets, and their erasure or transparency as well. At this time, when literary French prose did not yet exist, the octosyllabic couplet was, and would be for some time, the least marked literary medium, a sort of zero degree of literary writing. It did not seek to play on the emotional, even physical, effects of language and song. It let the audience concentrate on a narrative whose continuity it made no effort to interrupt, permitting the reader to master that narrative, to structure it, to think about it, to understand it. A style and a rhetoric that

privileged narration and an appeal to the reader, sometimes explicit, to reflect: these were the two constant traits of the medieval romance.

The First French Romances: From the Matter of Rome to the Matter of Britain

The first French romances were also distinguished from the *chansons de geste* by their subjects. They were adaptations of classical Latin works. The *Roman d'Alexandre* (*Romance of Alexander*), of which there were three versions between 1130 and 1190, is a largely fictional story of the life and conquests of the Macedonian king based on the account of Pseudo-Callisthenes. The *Roman de Thèbes* (*Romance of Thebes*, shortly after 1155) is based on Statius's *Thebaid* and relates the destiny of the children of Oedipus. The *Roman d'Eneas* (*Romance of Aeneas*, around 1160) is an adaptation of Vergil's *Aeneid*. The *Roman de Troie* (*Romance of Troy*) by Benoît de Sainte-Maure (before 1172) is the story of the Trojan War according to the Latin compilations that circulated under the name of Dares Phrygius. Wace's *Roman de Brut* (*Romance of Brut*, 1155), to which I will return shortly, is likewise related to these so-called “romances of antiquity” by its title, its prologue, and its initial subject, the migration of Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, from Latium to Great Britain.

The authors of these romances were of course clerks who were able to read and translate Latin. They claimed, even when it was far from true, to have followed their model with the greatest respect and fidelity. They were proud of the historical and philological competence that enabled them to choose the best source, to translate it exactly, and thus to provide those of their contemporaries who were ignorant of Latin with accurate information about the great events of the past. This is the concept of their task set forth in the long prologue to the *Roman de Troie*. Although it would later become the freest of all genres, romance was thus imprisoned, in its beginnings, within the narrow confines of translation, and its only proclaimed ambition was to tell the historical truth. The genre was called the *roman*, or romance, because it was a *mise en roman*, which is to say, a translation from Latin into the romance language.

The authors of these works did not, however, deny them-

selves the right to embroider on their models, and not merely by adapting them anachronistically to the civilization of their own time. They reduced the role played by mythology, turned rather towards a “marvelous” based on magic or necromancy, and made multiple additions to their models. But above all, they gave a prominent and altogether new role to love. They amplified the amorous episodes they found in their sources and invented new ones. They described eagerly and at length the birth of love, the confusion of a virgin heart hesitating to acknowledge that it loves, the bashfulness of lovers, their ruses, their evasions, their daring, their betrayals, their secrets, their confessions. The genre’s interest in such amorous questions made it particularly receptive to courtliness and courtly love. Even though neither one is clearly recognizable in the romances of antiquity, love was, even at this early stage, the great preoccupation of romance.

In the romances of antiquity, however, this preoccupation was still masked by the declared intention to write history. And not just any history. The romances of antiquity formed a series relating the history of a single family from the time of the Trojan war—and even before, since the history of Thebes, through the intermediary of Jason and the Argonauts, constitutes a sort of Trojan prehistory—and of its foundation of two nations: Aeneas fleeing Troy for Latium and, later, Brutus leaving Latium for Great Britain. The creation of this vast dynastic fresco in a series of literary works was motivated by a political intention. This is clear when one considers that Wace, the author of the *Roman de Brut*, and Benoît de Sainte-Maure, the author of the *Roman de Troie*, both also wrote histories of the ancestors of the king of England, Henry II Plantagenet, going back to the establishment of the Viking Rollo in Normandy—Wace in his *Roman de Rou* (*Romance of Rou*), Benoît in his *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* (*Chronicle of the Dukes of Normandy*). This series of works was intended to establish a link between the Anglo-Norman monarchy and the events and the most prestigious heroes of antiquity. If the French monarchs boasted of Charlemagne, the Plantagenets could boast of Aeneas.

But an apparently circumstantial aspect of this enterprise changed the destiny of the romance genre entirely. As long as

the romances’ action took place in antiquity and their sources were classical, their claim to historical truth could be maintained. When the action moved to the British Isles and the romancers began to use the work of contemporary historians as their sources, when King Arthur succeeded Brutus, the claim to historical truth became untenable.

Wace’s *Roman de Brut* is essentially an adaptation of the *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) published in 1136 by the Welsh clerk, and later bishop, Geoffrey of Monmouth. Inspired by an ardent “Breton,” which is to say Celtic, nationalism, Geoffrey devoted a great deal of his history to King Arthur, who, according to tradition, had fought the Saxon invaders at the beginning of the sixth century, to his father Uther, to the wizard Merlin, their protector, and to all the wonders and prodigies of the magnificent reign Geoffrey attributed to Arthur. Wace improved on the story and was the first to mention the Round Table. But other historians of Henry II’s court had their doubts about what Geoffrey had written concerning Arthur and the marvels of Britain. In them they saw only “fables.” Everyone was enchanted by them, but no one believed them. No one even pretended to believe them. Wace himself was openly sceptical on the topic of Arthur’s reign, even though it was the subject of half of his romance. The Arthurian world, which became the privileged framework for romances in the second half of the twelfth century, made no claim to be true. When it left antiquity and the Mediterranean world, romance renounced historical, referential truth and had to find another kind of truth, a truth of meaning, nourished mainly by a reflection on chivalry and love. From the 1170s on, this search for a new kind of truth would be the work of Chrétien de Troyes, whose great talent established the enduring model of courtly Arthurian romance and its quest for meaning.

Chrétien de Troyes

As is the case with many medieval authors who wrote before the fourteenth century, all we know of Chrétien is what we can deduce from his work and from his successors’ allusions to it. We will never know if the Christianus, canon of the abbey of Saint-Loup in Troyes, who is mentioned in a charter of 1173, is the same person as our romancer. He calls himself Chrétien

de Troyes in his first romance, *Erec et Enide* (*Erec and Enide*), and simply Chrétien everywhere else. His successors refer to him in both ways. A number of indications suggest he was a clerk, and this is confirmed by Wolfram von Eschenbach who calls him "Von Troys Meister Cristjân" ("Master Christian of Troyes") in *Parzifal*, his adaptation of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* (*Story of the Grail*).

The only thing known with any certainty about Chrétien is that he was in contact first with the court of Champagne, then with that of Flanders. The *Chevalier de la Charrette* (*Knight of the Cart*) was written in response to a command by the countess Marie de Champagne, to whom the work is dedicated. The *Conte du Graal* is dedicated to Philippe d'Alsace, count of Flanders. Marie de Champagne was the daughter of the king of France, Louis VII the Young, and Eleanor of Aquitaine. As we have already seen, Marie was the patroness of Andreas Capellanus and played an essential role in the diffusion of the courtly spirit and its amorous casuistry in northern France. The exaltation of the adulterous love of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere in the *Chevalier de la Charrette* seems to reflect her conception of love rather than that of the romancer. He himself suggests as much and let someone else finish the romance for him, albeit according to his indications. Chrétien could have met and entered the service of Philippe d'Alsace in 1182 when Philippe, the unofficial regent of the kingdom during Philippe Augustus's minority, came to Troyes to ask, in vain, for the hand of the recently widowed Countess Marie.

At the beginning of *Cligès*, Chrétien names his previous works. In this list are mentioned *Erec et Enide*, several lost translations of Ovid, and a poem on "King Mark and Blond Isolde," also lost. As it has come down to us, his *oeuvre* consists of two love songs and five romances: *Erec et Enide* (around 1170), *Cligès* (around 1176), *Le Chevalier au Lion* (*The Knight with the Lion*) and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, probably written simultaneously between 1177 and 1181, and *Le Conte du Graal*, begun between 1182 and 1190 and left unfinished, undoubtedly because of the poet's death. The romance *Guillaume d'Angleterre* (*William of England*), whose author calls himself Chrétien, cannot be attributed to our Chrétien with any certainty.

The five romances have obvious common traits. They are all

Arthurian romances. Love plays an important role in all of them, and in the first four, it plays an essential role. Unlike Wace, Chrétien did not choose history for his subject, generation after generation, reign after reign. The action of each romance is concentrated in time and around the central character. Arthur, moreover, is never the hero of the romances even though the events they relate always take place during his reign. He is the judge and the guarantor of chivalrous and amorous values. The Arthurian world is thus an unchanging given framing the evolution and destiny of the protagonist. In Chrétien's romances, in other words, Arthur's reign is extracted from the chronological succession in which it had previously existed. It floats in the past without attachments. It becomes a mythical time, somewhat analogous to the "once upon a time" of tales. The moorings attaching romance to history were thus definitively broken while, at the same time, the subject of romance was reduced to the adventures and the destiny of a single character, to the crucial moments of a life.

In contrast to Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, Chrétien not only made no effort to relate the history of Arthur's reign, he assumed that his audience was already so familiar with the Arthurian world that explanations and background information were superfluous. Each particular narrative is presented as a fragment, a tip, of a vast story whose underlying continuity must be mastered by every reader. No romance relates the whole story of King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, the Round Table, its customs, and its knights, whose names the poet simply enumerates in a knowing way when their presence serves to enhance a ceremony, tournament, or festival. To all this is added a mixture of strangeness and familiarity characterizing the progress of the hero and his adventures. Leaving the castle of King Arthur, entering the nearby forest, the knightly hero immediately enters an unknown, alien, and threatening world where, nonetheless, news travels with astonishing speed and where he never ceases to meet people who already know him, sometimes better than he knows himself, and who show him his destiny in an imperious and fragmentary way. Like the hero, the audience evolves in a world of signs that refer, perpetually, knowingly, and enigmatically, to a meaning that is seemingly self-evident and, because it is self-evident, hidden. The world of

these romances is fraught with mysteriously conspicuous—and conspicuously mysterious—meaning.

Chrétien's innovations with respect to Arthurian time and the fragmentation of the romance material thus have very important consequences for the meaning of his romances. Because he no longer claimed to relate a referential truth, Chrétien was obliged to suggest that his works proposed some other type of meaning. He did this especially in their prologues. Unlike his predecessors, he does not claim that his source is true—he says nothing about it, or even underlines its insignificance (as in *Erec et Enide*)—but hints, rather, that he alone is responsible for a meaning revealed above all by the *conjointure*, or organization, he gives to his story. This meaning has the value of a lesson and is not the same as the literal meaning of the story; but neither does it enjoy the autonomous existence of the second, “higher,” meaning proposed by an allegorical work. Distinct from the literal meaning, this other meaning is nonetheless immanent in the literal meaning and must remain so. The story is not a pretext for the meaning. The adventures experienced by the hero are simultaneously the cause and the sign of his evolution. The external adventure is simultaneously the source and the image of an internal one. For the meaning is altogether bound up with adventure and love. The solitary figure of the knight errant, almost entirely Chrétien's invention, emblematises the concerns of his romances: the discovery of one's self, of love, and of the other.

Chrétien stands out as much for his unique tone, style, and type of narration as for the new orientation he gave to romance. The predominant component in his tone is humor, manifesting itself in the distance he puts—not constantly, but lightly, from time to time—between himself and his characters and the situations in which he places them. By means of an aside or a remark, he underlines the contradictions or the mechanical aspect of a behavior or a situation, shows what is unexpected, or too expected, about them, lucidly exposes a character's blindness. This light tone and humor are enhanced by a distinctive style; an easy, rapid, gliding style making good use of the verse. Chrétien was the first to “break” the octosyllabic couplet. Instead of forcing their syntax into the mold of the line or the couplet and being hammered by its rhythm, his sentences are

out of sync with the couplet. They play with the ruptures between the couplet's rhythm and their own. They do not limit themselves to two lines, but run longer, with new starts and subordinations. To this broken couplet are added ellipses, contractions, a brevity of expression that goes well with the suppleness and the naturalness born from breaking the couplet.

Chrétien de Troyes not only marked an important stage in the development of French literature, he remains one of the greatest French authors of all time.

The Question of Celtic Sources: The Breton Lay

Chrétien treated his sources with great freedom; but he did not altogether invent the stories he told. Nor did Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace. The former, in fact, explicitly declared that he used Breton sources. The names, the events, the motifs, the type of marvelous, sometimes even the very stories one finds in the works of these two authors, of Chrétien, and of his successors, have counterparts and echoes in Celtic—mainly Irish and Welsh—folklore and texts. One encounters King Arthur and his companions, or characters who bear the same name as those of Chrétien and have adventures similar to theirs (Owein, Peredur, and Gereint who correspond to Yvain, Perceval, and Erec) in the *Mabinogion*, a collection of Welsh stories in prose including *Breudwyd Rhonabwy* (*The Dream of Rhonabwy*) and *Culhwch ac Olwen* (*Culhwch and Olwen*). But in the state in which they have come down to us, preserved in thirteenth-century manuscripts, these texts are later than the French romances and seem to have been at least partially influenced by them. However, the originality and antiquity of the various Celtic literatures and traditions are so well proven, and the parallels between the Welsh stories and the French romances so constant and so striking, that it is impossible not to believe that the latter borrowed from the former. Despite Edmond Faral's excessive scepticism,¹ and as other critics like Roger Sherman Loomis and Jean Marx have maintained,² there is no doubt that Geoffrey of Monmouth

¹ E. Faral, *La Légende arthurienne*, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1929).

² J. Marx, *La Légende arthurienne et le Graal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952); R. S. Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949).

borrowed from Celtic sources and that French romancers subsequently did the same, directly or indirectly. This does not at all mean, of course, that it is possible or legitimate to reduce their works to these sources.

In one case at least the French poet explained the work of adaptation she undertook. This poet is Marie de France, undoubtedly a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, whose surname indicates simply that, although she lived in Great Britain, she was a native of the Ile-de-France. Her masterwork is a collection of twelve lays, here meaning short stories in verse (the word also refers to a lyrical musical genre). In the general prologue to this collection, Marie declares that she decided to adapt Breton lays into French so that they would not be forgotten; and at the beginning of each lay she is careful to mention its origin and Breton roots, giving its title in the original language, for example, or indicating the precise place to which the legend is attached. For instance:

Une aventure vus dirai
 Dunt li Bretun firent un lai.
Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,
 Si l'apelent en leur païs;
 Ceo est «russignol» en franceis
 Et «nihtegale» en dreit engleis.
 En Seint Mallo....

(*Laüstic*, 1-7)

(I will tell you of an adventure about which the Bretons made a lay. Its name is *Laüstic*: that's what they call it, I believe, in their country. This means "rossignol" in French and "nightingale" in good English. In Saint-Malo....)

One of Marie's lays is Arthurian (*Landval*), another is linked to the legend of Tristan (*Chèvrefeuille* [*Honeysuckle*]). About an equal number of anonymous lays survive in addition to Marie's and a comparison of the two groups supports rather than contradicts Marie's declarations. Their motifs and characters are to be found not only in folklore, but specifically, for some of them, in Celtic folklore: supernatural white animals, werewolves, fairy mistresses, water-marked frontiers of the Other World, lovers from other worlds, or from the depths of rivers and lakes, or

from the skies. Even the word *lai* is a Celtic word meaning a song, thus justifying the second meaning that it acquired in French.

It is impossible to deny that there are Celtic echoes in French "Breton" literature. And if the authors sometimes claim that these echoes are more numerous in their works than they really are, they only provide further confirmation of the seductiveness of this universe for them and for their readers. But what was the basis of this seductiveness? How ought one to interpret the intensity of the echoes not only of Celtic mythology, but, more broadly, of Indo-European mythology in French romances whose organization and evident interests seem of so different an order? In these works, and especially in the works of Chrétien, it is possible, for example, to discern an attention to calendrical time and its tangle of hagiographical and mythological traditions so precise that it cannot be attributed to chance and its value cannot be measured adequately in terms of the literary composition. The problems and questions posed by the links between this literature and myths or between this literature and what we call folklore are not so much problems and questions of sources as problems and questions of interpretation.

Tristan and Isolde

Why treat the lovers of Cornwall, Tristan and Isolde, separately? Do they not belong to the Breton world and the Breton romances? In French literature, were they not finally integrated into the Arthurian world? Nonetheless, they cannot be reduced to any norm. Their story was known very early and cited everywhere, but only fragments of the first French romances about them have survived. They are both love's model and foils for model lovers. Chrétien was never able to get away from them and never succeeded in conjuring the curse he saw hanging over them. Rarely have literary heroes enjoyed such ambiguous glory.

Even though the evidence is either of uncertain date or difficult to interpret, it seems that the troubadours knew of Tristan and Isolde by the middle of the twelfth century—before Chrétien, before Wace even. For them, Tristan's passion quickly became the standard for, and the measure of, all love, and

the play on the words “triste / Tristan” (“sad / Tristan”), ever more frequent in subsequent versions of the story, seems to have been ancient. Other evidence suggests that the story was already in circulation in the first half of the twelfth century. The storyteller Breri, whom Thomas invokes as an authority in his *Roman de Tristan* (*Romance of Tristan*, c. 1172–1175), is certainly the same person as the Bleheris mentioned twenty years later in the *Seconde continuation de Perceval* (*Second Continuation of Perceval*) and the “Bledhericus famosus ille fabulator” (“that famous storyteller Bledhericus”) who, according to the description of Wales written by Gerald of Wales around 1180, was active before 1150. He has also been identified, with some likelihood, with the Welsh knight Bledri ap Cadifor, named in documents composed between 1116 and 1135.

In any case, there is no doubt that the legend was known at an early date and was of Celtic origin. *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (*The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*), an Irish *aithed*, or tale of elopement, going back to at least the ninth century, offers very close parallels to the story of Tristan and Isolde in some of its most precise details as well as in its overall plot. The Welsh Triads, known to us, it is true, only in late manuscripts, mention several times a Drystan or Trystan, son of Tallwch, lover of Essylt, the wife of his uncle King March. Tristan is associated with King Arthur in the Triads and is said to be one of his close advisors.

Despite the precocious popularity of the legend, a sort of curse seems to have struck the first French works devoted to it. Two have been lost altogether (a phenomenon that is rarer than is sometimes believed): the romance of an author called La Chievre and Chrétien’s poem on “King Mark and Blond Isolde.” The others are fragmentary, either because their authors chose to relate only one particular episode, as in the case of Marie de France’s *Chèvrefeuille* and the two versions of the *Folie Tristan* (*Tristan’s Madness*), or because they survive in mutilated form, like the romances of Béroul and Thomas. In order to reconstruct the whole story, one must turn to the German romances of Eilhart von Oberg and Gottfried von Strassburg, inspired by the French works, and the Norse *Tristrams saga ok Isöndar* (*The Saga of Tristam and Isolde*). This is an intriguing state of affairs, the effect, it has been suggested, of a kind of

censorship. And it is true that the legend troubled its medieval French audiences as much as it fascinated them. Faithful to courtly orthodoxy, the poets—Chrétien among them in one of his two surviving songs—proclaimed the superiority of their love to Tristan’s, for they had chosen freely to love, while he had been constrained to do so by the power of the potion. In *Cligès*, Chrétien refers openly to the situation of Tristan and Isolde and tries—without any real success—to make it more morally acceptable by enabling his heroine to avoid having to sleep with her husband as well as her lover. But these reservations did not diminish the legend’s immense success, nor do they in any way explain the fragmentary character of the first French poems inspired by it. This fragmentary character is, rather, the consequence of a popularity that enabled and encouraged authors to narrate an episode or portion of the story without retelling or recopying the whole history from beginning to end.

Béroul’s romance (c. 1190?), whose middle section has been preserved, relates the so-called “common” version of *Tristan et Iseut* (*Tristan and Isolde*), while Thomas’s romance, of which we possess several separate fragments and the end, relates the so-called “courtly” version. One of the differences between the two is that the effect of the potion lasts for only a limited time in Béroul’s version, but lasts for life in Thomas’s, making it a symbol of love. But the main difference between the two versions is their style. Rougher, Béroul writes with an effective simplicity that makes no effort to analyze the protagonists’ feelings and, indeed, his romance draws its strength from this conciseness. Thomas, on the other hand, combines a virtuoso—and sometimes slightly self-satisfied—rhetoric with a keen and intense perception of the lovers’ passion.

The “Breton” Romance and the Heritage of Chrétien

The profound influence Chrétien’s romances exercised on subsequent medieval French literature manifested itself in several ways. His romances were imitated. They supplied the subject of the first prose romances. They produced an immediate reaction among the rivals of the master from Champagne, who took great pains to affirm their own originality but were constrained to define themselves in relation to him.

Chrétien’s romances were imitated and the Arthurian verse

romance, henceforward a distinct literary genre, was immensely successful through the second half of the thirteenth century when its popularity was definitively overtaken by that of the prose romance. It retained the characteristics Chrétien had given it. Romance authors liked to trace the amorous and chivalric apprenticeship of a young hero through a series of adventures that are deliberately marvelous and very often take the form of a quest. When the hero is as well-established a knight and lover as Arthur's nephew Gawain, the romancers are content simply to recount his exploits. In this family of romances one finds works like Renaut de Beaujeu's *Le Bel Inconnu (The Handsome Stranger)*, Paimen de Mézières's *La Mule sans frein (The Mule without a Bit)*, *Le Chevalier à l'épée (The Knight with the Sword)*, Raoul de Houdenc's *Meraugis de Portlesguez (Meraugis of Portlesguez)*, *La Vengeance Raguidel (The Avenging of Raguidel)*; this also has been attributed to Raoul), *Humbaut, L'Atre périlleux (The Perilous Hearth)*, Robert de Blois's *Beaudous, Fergus, Yder, Durmart le Gallois (Durmart the Welshman)*, *Le Chevalier aux deux épées (The Knight with Two Swords)*, *Les Merveilles de Rigomer (The Wonders of Rigomer)*, the interminable *Claris et Laris (Claris and Laris)*, *Floriant et Florete (Floriant and Florete)*, *Escanor, Gliglois*, and, in the language of *oc*, *Jaufré*. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann has argued plausibly that the verse romance, already out of fashion on the continent by the second half of the thirteenth century, survived in the culturally conservative milieu of the Anglo-Norman court.¹ It was for this court that Froissart composed the first version of his *Méliador*, the last link in this tradition, at the end of the fourteenth century, when no one had written an Arthurian verse romance for over a hundred years.

But Chrétien's influence was most fertile in the area of a very particular subject and theme: the Grail. As was mentioned earlier, his last romance, *Le Conte du Graal*, remained unfinished. At the Grail castle, Perceval fails to ask the question that would heal his cousin, the Fisher King; he then wanders for five years, far from God and men, before confessing to his uncle,

¹ B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrestien bis Froissart: Zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1980).

the hermit. The reader senses that he is now ready to succeed where he failed the first time, but the romance has nothing more to say about him; it goes on to relate the adventures of Gawain and breaks off in the middle of one of them. An admirable romance, a fascinating subject: how could one bear not knowing the ending? So continuations were added to the *Conte du Graal*. Far from bringing the romance to an end, the first continuation, written in the first years of the thirteenth century, does not even get around to Perceval. It merely continues, and not without talent, to relate the adventures of Gawain. The second, attributed to Wauchier de Denain but in reality anonymous, does indeed continue the adventures of Perceval, but it, too, is unfinished. Between 1233 and 1237, a third continuation by a certain Manessier finally brings the story to an end: Perceval succeeds his cousin the Fisher King as lord of the Grail castle. Between 1225 and 1230, a poet named Gerbert, perhaps the Gerbert of Montreuil who wrote the *Roman de la Violette (Romance of the Violet)*, composed another continuation, independent of the other three, which, despite its 17,000 lines, does not altogether bring to a close the ultimate adventure of the Grail. Manessier and Gerbert accent the religious aspect of the story, already discreetly present in Chrétien's romance. But this tendency to Christianize the Grail is far more evident in the earlier work of Robert de Boron.

A knight from the Franche-Comté, Robert de Boron composed a verse romance, the *Roman de l'estoire du Graal* or *Joseph d'Arimathie (Romance of the Story of the Grail or Joseph of Arimathea)*, written no later than 1215. In this poem, the Grail becomes a Christian relic, the cup used at the Last Supper, in which Joseph of Arimathea subsequently caught Christ's blood as he hung on the cross. Later, Robert de Boron wrote a *Merlin*, of which only the first 500 lines survive, but it is also known to us through a prose adaptation. He was probably also the author of a *Perceval*, of which, according to some scholars, the *Didot-Perceval* is the prose adaptation. These three works formed a first Grail cycle preceding the prose *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. Robert de Boron's work was an important turning point in the treatment of the Grail material for two reasons. First, he imposed—definitively—a religious and mystic interpretation on the Grail. Second, the destiny of these works, written in verse but quickly

adapted into prose, is intimately bound up with the appearance of the first prose romances, which were Grail romances based in many ways on the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, as we will see in the following chapter.

Both the traditional verse romances and the new prose romances of the thirteenth century thus owe a great deal, in different ways, to the work of Chrétien.

The Many Paths of Adventure

While Chrétien was still alive, his colleague and rival Gautier d'Arras reproached both him, without naming him, and other amateurs of the Breton marvelous with telling incredible stories that made those who heard them think they were dreaming rather than awake. This was the beginning of a reaction against Chrétien's influence, a reaction often, but incorrectly, termed "realist." The romancers who reacted against Chrétien's influence did not in any way contest his essential contribution. Like him, they implicitly admitted the fictive nature of romance and made no claim whatsoever to historical or referential truth. Their concept of verisimilitude was simply a little different from his and they preferred to avoid the mythical mists of the Arthurian world. The action of *Ille et Galeron* (*Ille and Galeron*), Gautier's first romance, moves from Brittany to Rome; his second romance, *Eracle*, is something between a romance of antiquity and a saint's life, since the model for his hero is the Byzantine emperor Heraklios and the romance's second part is based on the legend of the discovery of the Holy Cross. Jean Renart, who, like Gautier, delivers a polemical elegy of verisimilitude in his first romance, *L'Escoufle* (*The Kite*, around 1200), is otherwise entirely unlike him. A brilliant stylist, a malicious and subtle mind, able to disconcert without seeming to and to overturn the commonplaces he feigned to use, he could do a great deal with nothing and took pleasure in generic settings, depicting with grace and humor scenes that only appear to be quotidian. In his *Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole* (*Romance of the Rose or of Guillaume of Dole*, around 1212 or 1228, according to different scholars), he was the first to insert lyric pieces in a romance, a technique that subsequently enjoyed great success throughout the rest of the Middle Ages and one whose interest and function he explains with evident pride in

the prologue. He was quickly imitated, in this and other ways, by Gerbert de Montreuil in his *Roman de la Violette ou de Gérard de Nevers* (*Romance of the Violet or of Gerard of Nevers*), while at the end of the century, Jakemes's *Roman du Châtelain de Coucy et de la Dame de Fayel* (*Romance of the Chatelain of Coucy and the Lady of Fayel*) cites poems by the twelfth-century troubère known as the Châtelain de Coucy, who is also the hero of the romance.

Jean Renart is likewise the author of a sort of courtly short story, the delightful *Lai de l'ombre* (*Lay of the Shadow*). This poem is not altogether unique. Certain other poems, like *La châtelaine de Vergi* (*The Chatelaine of Vergi*), *Le vair palefroi* (*The Dappled Palfrey*) of Huon le Roi, and, later, the *Dit du prunier* (*Poem of the Plum Tree*), use the pretext of a very simple intrigue to offer a reflection—or a shadow—of courtly life, of a refinement of manners and feelings they do not feel obliged to transport to the distant Breton universe and dress up in Arthurian accessories. These tales reveal that the elegance one finds in the works of Chrétien also inhabits the contemporary world.

But there is a host of other romances that, without giving any thought to verisimilitude or seeking the bareness of an elegant brevity, simply give themselves up to a passion for adventures in other frameworks and according to other conventions than those of the Arthurian world, like *Ipomedon* and *Protheselaus* by the Norman clerk Hue de Rothelande, who was roughly a contemporary of Chrétien and wrote with a ready pen and a somewhat cynical smuttiness. Or all the romances whose action takes place in the Mediterranean basin, either because they remain faithful to antiquity—for their setting if not for their sources—like *Athis et Prophilias* (*Athis and Prophilias*) and *Florimont*, or because they prolong the Alexandrian tradition of stories of separated lovers who travel the world over in search of one another, like *Floire et Blanchesflor* (*Floire and Blanchesflor*) or, to some degree, *Partonopeus de Blois* (*Partonopeus of Blois*), in which the fairy mistress plays an interesting role. In the thirteenth century, these diverse romances of adventure, nourished with various leftovers, with borrowings from folklore and myth, with diverse phantasms—like the incest in Philippe de Remi's *La Manekine* (*The Manikin*), in Jehan Maillart's *Roman du comte d'Anjou* (*Romance of the Count of Anjou*), in the *Roman de la*

Belle Hélène de Constantinople (*Romance of Beautiful Helen of Constantinople*), in the updated version of the old *Roman d'Apollonius de Tyr* (*Romance of Apollonius of Tyr*)—these romances are as numerous as the Arthurian verse romances. Adapted into prose, many of them—some of those cited above, but also *Blancandin*, Adenet le Roi's *Cléomadès*, and many others—enjoyed a certain success right through to the end of the Middle Ages . . . at which point we will return to them.

PART THREE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A LITERATURE

The fertile and original development of French literature that began in the twelfth century does not seem to have continued with the same vigor after the first third of the thirteenth century. The principal literary forms were in place by then and, from our perspective, they seem to have been simply maintained, and sometimes exhausted, rather than renewed. Although it is not entirely false, this impression should not prevent us from grasping the importance of the thirteenth century.

The thirteenth century was critical, assimilating and organizing the achievements and acquisitions of the preceding century in all domains of intellectual life. It was the age of encyclopedias—*specula*, or “mirrors,” as they were then called—and of *summae*, or “compendiums.” The *Summa theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, is a synthesis of a body of theological reflection that had been developing with an extreme, but sometimes disorganized and, in the eyes of the Church, even dangerous, vigor since the end of the eleventh century. The triple “mirror”—the *Speculum naturale, doctrinale, historiale* (*The Natural, Doctrinal, and Historical Mirror*)—of Vincent of Beauvais, another Dominican, is a monument of erudition which sought to bring together all the knowledge of its time. Universities appeared during this period and, developing rapidly, undertook to organize and disseminate this knowledge. In the domain of literature there was also an effort toward organization and reflection, and French literature began timidly to admit of intellectual speculation.

Because of the conditions underlying its diffusion and practice, literature did not really merit its name, from the word *letters*, until the thirteenth century. It was then that the circulation of texts was truly developed and organized. Twelfth-century French literary manuscripts are rare and the works of that period are known to us principally through manuscripts copied