

MICHAEL LEWIS

## *Tristan and the Medieval Renaissance*

### *ABSTRACT*

*Historians have identified a medieval renaissance which occurred during the twelfth century. Developing first in the ducal courts of Southern France was the new vernacular poetry of the Troubadours, which challenged Christian beliefs and advocated a refined courtly image. Contemporaries of this movement such as the Minnesingers of Germany ensured the spread of these ideals across Western Europe over the course of a century, which would become the foundations for an evolving courtly culture. There was a greater appreciation for knowledge and individuals were encouraged to attend the new Universities and obtain a higher education. The role of women becomes much more prominent as the women of the nobility take on a dominant role in both the literature of the period and in refining the culture of the courts. Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* was written at the end of the twelfth century, regarded as a masterpiece this fiction exemplifies the evolving courtly culture of the period, serving as a tool through which the values of the medieval courts of France and Germany can be assessed.*

The break from the Early Middle Ages was ushered in by the cessation of the barbarian invasions of Europe. For the first time in history, Europe was no longer being assailed by various external forces. A new age was born which would witness the transformation of European society, the medieval renaissance of the twelfth century. Concerned no longer with mere survival, society developed into one which explored leisurely activity and developed a more refined culture. This was seen as a shift from a "heroic culture" to a "courtly culture,"<sup>1</sup> this cultural shift was characterized as an intellectual revitalization of the West brought about by the rediscovery of the classics, with the addition of Arabic commentaries and translations. Centralized around the courts of the nobility, a greater emphasize was placed on the ideas of growth and refinement, there was a conscious effort amongst the nobility which was reflected on a wider social level to attain a higher education and become a more cultured and refined individual. As a result there was a rise in appreciation of the individual, which can be seen most prominently in the substantial change in the perception of noble women, and their changing social roles. They became the "judges" of society and prominent patronesses of the arts, especially with regards to literature. Developing first in the ducal and princely courts of Southern France, under the leadership of prolific figures such as William IX of Aquitaine, the Troubadour movement was born this was a new form of literature,

<sup>1</sup> June Hall McCash, "The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular," *Comparative Literature* 60:1 (2008): 45.

## 2 CHIVALRY AND HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES (UNDERGRADUATE PAPER)

expressed through the use of the vernacular language and espousing the ideals of “courtly love” which culminated in the creation of the Romance genre. Gottfried von Strassburg’s thirteenth century work *Tristan* was regarded as the finest retelling of the Tristan legend and considered a masterpiece of High Middle German literature, marking it as an important vernacular work of the High Middle Ages. An analysis of *Tristan* and similar romances exemplifies the ideals of the twelfth century renaissance and the rise of the vernacular language, providing a commentary on society and its emerging ideas in France and Germany.

The twelfth century was a period of cultural reawakening and revival, a medieval renaissance, which occurred roughly between the years 1050 and 1250, although the dates continue to be debated amongst historians.<sup>2</sup> This was a period of rapid social change based on the rediscovery of the classics; as such it had strong philosophical and scientific foundations and was responsible for important transformations in economics, politics, and the arts. The dominant ideology of the medieval period in Europe was Christianity. Christianity was the “matrix” of medieval life, it defined ideology concerning birth, marriage, death, sex, and eating, cooking instructions even went as far as to suggest that while boiling an egg one should pass the time by saying a Miserere.<sup>3</sup> Monasteries and convents served as the only institutions of education and were the primary production centers of literature, based exclusively around Latin. Christianity defined the ‘rules’ for law and medicine, and provided the subject matter for philosophy and scholarship, “membership” in the Church was not an option, but was a compulsory requirement of society with no alternatives, as such it maintained a hold which was difficult to dislodge.<sup>4</sup>

The troubadour movement of Southern France led to a cultural shift which challenged traditional Christian thought. The troubadours emerging from the nobility of Provence developed a poetic vernacular literature which dominated literature in Southern France for a century and quickly spread across Western Europe, becoming known as the minnesingers (“love singers”) in Germany and the trouveres in Northern France. Central to the works of the troubadours was a new perception on the idea of love which created tension between the secular world and the church which held a condemning view on the subject, “That this wonderful experience should be condemned as a sin is the thing the troubadour just says no to. Love is the

<sup>2</sup> William R. Cook and Ronald Herzman, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 212.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. (New York: Ballantine Books. 1978), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

meaning of life – it is the high point of life.”<sup>5</sup> The poetry of the troubadours and the minnesingers has puzzled scholars for generations; their works represent a significant shift in thinking and are responsible for the birth of the ideal of courtly love. The troubadour concept of love has always come across as somewhat abnormal. It was an unreal, otherworldly concept of love reserved exclusively for knights and other members of the nobility. This concept of love was characterized as being overly sentimental, diffident, and submissive, as such it seems somewhat oppositional to the traditional values associated with the warrior class.<sup>6</sup> The works of the troubadours sang tales of gallant men who were prided both on their skill in combat and etiquette, it challenged the Church’s position of blaming women for the fall and instead venerated and raised their status; ideas which would be the catalyst of change in society, they transformed, “...the manners of an aristocracy emerging from rustic brutality into a chivalry that almost redeemed war with courtesy, and adultery with grace.”<sup>7</sup> The “barbaric” appearance of an earlier age was replaced by one of cleanliness, one which expressed a noble civility.

William IX, Duke of Aquitaine who was known as “the Troubadour” and considered the father of the troubadour movement, characterized several important aspects of the ideals of court society. William was an extremely influential figure during the twelfth century, by the age of 11 he was the ruler of an essentially independent Southern France. He was later a commander during the First Crusade, and he sang of its victories, but like so many other soldiers in “heresy-infected lands” he became contentious of the Church and often mocked it and its’ priests.<sup>8</sup> William quickly became an enemy of the Church; he resented and refused to conform to many of their teachings, and although married he was involved in several public affairs, most notably running off with the Viscountess of Chatellerault and living with her in open scandal.<sup>9</sup>

An old Provencal biography describes him as “one of the most courteous men in the world, and a great deceiver of ladies; and he was a brave knight and had much to do with love affairs; and he knew well how to sing and make verses;

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*. (New York: Broadway, 1988), 192.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Moller, “The Meaning of Courtly Love,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 73:287 (1960): 39.

<sup>7</sup> Will Durant, *The Age of Faith*. (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1950), 1037.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

and for a long time he roamed all through the land to deceive  
the ladies.”<sup>10</sup>

This description exemplified several ideals of the troubadours: William was a knight trained in the art of combat; however he also acquired an education which allowed him to write and play such an influential role in Southern French literature. His actions around women marked both their importance to him, and on a larger social scale, the change in perception of them. It additionally showed a disregard for the Christian idea of chastity as he openly committed adultery.

Gottfried’s Tristan shares many character traits with William IX and is presented as a troubadour type character. Where Gottfried differed notably from some of his contemporaries, and from previous literature, was that Tristan was presented primarily as an artist or trickster figure, rather than as a traditional knight. Medieval thinking before the eleventh century was primarily concerned with praising the martial prowess of an individual, and as such the popular *chansons de geste* depicted heroes overcoming insurmountable odds due to tremendous feats in combat.<sup>11</sup> Gottfried’s Tristan is a knight, and early in *Tristan* the fact that he is of the nobility is made known and he is quickly knighted by King Mark of Cornwall. Conforming to the ideal of martial importance, Tristan was responsible for liberating Cornwall from the threat of Ireland when he defeated Isolde’s uncle, Morolt. The ideal of knighthood was based on concepts such as honour, loyalty, and most important of all martial prowess. However with the literary shift of the romance genre, these ideas were reassessed, leading to the creation of a new masculine ideal, later known as the courtier. The courtier combined the heroic and martial elements of the idealized knight with the developing courtly culture of the medieval renaissance, it was expected that he would refine himself as an individual by attaining a higher education and becoming a courtly gentleman.

The medieval renaissance would see the rise of a secular institution of knowledge; it was during this period that the University was established, the most prominent of which were: Paris, Oxford, and Bologna. The effects of the classics and the transmission of Arabic influences can be seen in the curriculum of the medieval university. A student would begin by studying his Bachelor of Arts, this would consist of learning the *trivium*: rhetoric, logic, and grammar<sup>12</sup>, and the *quadrivium*: astronomy, arithmetic, geometry,

<sup>10</sup> Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 1036.

<sup>11</sup> Cook and Herzman, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 231.

<sup>12</sup> Janine Larmon Peterson. “Defining a Textbook: Gloss versus Gloss in a Medieval Schoolbook,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 20 (2003): 18.

and music.<sup>13</sup> He could then further his studies with a Masters of Arts, followed then by Doctorates in either, Medicine, Philosophy, Divinity, or Jurisprudence. The ability to speak multiple languages has always been recognized as a major intellectual accomplishment, in medieval Germany linguistic codes served as signifiers of social class or rank, as a result courtly education in Germany regularly included training in languages, especially French and its various dialects such as Provencal or Occitan.<sup>14</sup> While the setting of Gottfried's *Tristan* is not Germany during the High Middle Ages, King Mark's court certainly reflects the German appreciation for an education in multiple languages; Gottfried's lovers, Tristan and Isolde, were both admired by the nobles of Cornwall for their mastery of language and foreign tongues.

Tristan was this ideal courtier, he had an extensive grasp of language displaying a proficiency in various tongues, and his skills in terms of musical talent were praised throughout the story. These values of Tristan's character are exemplified and praised the most throughout the legend, while Tristan completes various knightly quests; he was successful more often than not due to his wit rather than his skill with a sword. Gottfried portrayed Tristan as one of these well educated individuals like William, and his excellence in the field of music was recognized and celebrated as it was his skill with the harp which saved Isolde,

"You are wrong," retorted Tristan, "You are the fool, Gandin!  
You are the one who has been fooled! Since what you tricked  
from Mark with your rote, I now take away with my harp!  
Deceiver that you are, you have now been duped in return.  
Tristan followed after you till now he has outwitted you!"<sup>15</sup>

Tristan's accomplishments throughout the story were regarded more often than not as triumphs of intellect rather than feats of arms. His ability to deceive was another trait he shared with William, this talent was a direct result of an education in the previously mentioned *trivium*, which focused on cultivating the power of language and taught students how to use it to their advantage.

Gottfried's Isolde, similarly becomes well skilled in the art of deception and cunning, something which traditionally was associated with femininity, but with the changes brought about by courtly society's

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Dyer. "Speculative 'Musicia' and the Medieval University of Paris," *Music and Letters* 90:2 (2009): 181.

<sup>14</sup> Albrecht Classen. "Polyglots in Medieval German Literature: Outsiders, Critics, or Revolutionaries?" *Neophilologus* 91 (2007): pp 101-102

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*. trans. by A.T. Hatto. (Toronto: Penguins Books, 1960), 218.

## 6 CHIVALRY AND HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES (UNDERGRADUATE PAPER)

appreciation of the individual, became avenues whereby men could confirm and refine their masculinity.<sup>16</sup> She and Tristan essentially created their own language, emphasizing the importance of an education in the trivium and the ability to master its tools such as rhetoric. As a result the lovers become identified as “polyglots” individuals who have a unique mastery of language which separated them from social norms.<sup>17</sup> This skill has given them the unique opportunity to conceal lie within truth, and truth within lies, which allowed both Tristan and Isolde to outwardly say one thing, which appeared virtuous and conformed with courtly expectations, but at the same time communicated the truth to one another.<sup>18</sup> This can be seen throughout various scenes within Gottfried’s work, most notably being the ordeal scene where Isolde successfully manipulated both the language of her oath and the events leading up to the ordeal, to conceal the truth that she has been with another man, that it is Tristan, and that the pilgrim is in fact Tristan in disguise. Isolde can be seen as representing the ideal courtly woman, and her actions and her success reflected the increasing social status afforded to women of the nobility. The words exchanged by the lovers when in the presence of witnesses throughout the story conveyed a literal truth that surpassed the understanding of society at large and was understood only by the lovers.<sup>19</sup> Isolde played one of the most important roles at the court of King Mark, it was as a result of her manipulations of scheme and tongue that the honour and reputation of the court was preserved, additionally Isolde managed to confirm her chastity as well, marking her out as an exemplar of the courtly traditions.<sup>20</sup>

While the universities were populated exclusively by men (formal education ended at a much earlier age for women than for men), the new appreciation of knowledge and education was not restricted for males only, and there was an encouragement for women of the nobility to receive an education. The acceptance of the Romance and Germanic vernaculars during the medieval renaissance opened a floodgate for women’s self-expression, exemplified by efforts to learn and participate fully in courtly culture, even taking part in the later great debates which preceded the Reformation; this marked a revolution in Western thinking and culture.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen

<sup>16</sup> Angus Cheng-yu Yen. “Power, Sex, and Lies in Gottfried’s *Tristan*” (PhD diss., National Chung-Cheng University, 2008), pp 80-82.

<sup>17</sup> Classen, “Polyglots in Medieval German Literature: Outsiders, Critics, or Revolutionaries?” 101.

<sup>18</sup> James F. Poag. “Lying Truth in Gottfried’s *Tristan*.” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 61:2 (1987): 232.

<sup>19</sup> Frances L Decker. “Gottfried’s *Tristan* and the Minnesang: The Relationship between the Illicit Couple and Courtly Society.” *The German Quarterly* 55:1 (1982): 74.

<sup>20</sup> Yen, “Power, Sex, and Lies in Gottfried’s *Tristan*,” 82.

<sup>21</sup> McCash, “The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular,” pp 51-52.

most aptly by the fact that there was a noticeable trend whereby educated women became more valuable as wives.

Heloise for example was an upper class noble woman whose education indicated that she was being tutored as a prospective wife, as she had a strong understanding of secular and worldly views. Being a woman of the church, this presents a significant contrast with Hildegard who did not receive a private education like Heloise. Educated as a "Bride of Christ" Hildegard was one of the most prominent female church based writers of the period; by comparison Hildegard's education followed a much more traditional monastic education, her Latin works reflected the authoritative views of the medieval Christian thought system often discussing the ideas of good and evil.<sup>22</sup> Heloise was very well educated; she was reputed to be the most learned woman in France.<sup>23</sup> She was tutored by Abelard and later involved in a relationship with him, he was a member of the clergy who was regarded as one of the most significant contributors to medieval scholastic philosophy. Being a part of monastic society Heloise was well learned in Latin, as can be seen in her letters to Abelard; additionally Abelard claimed that she knew both Greek and Hebrew, a claim which if true would make her unique amongst twelfth century noble women, and would show a knowledge of language surpassing that of her master.<sup>24</sup> Gottfried's Isolde provides perhaps the closest secular parallel to Heloise; she was also highly educated, and home-tutored by Tristan, who as mentioned earlier reflected the values of German education during the High Middle Ages. Like Tristan she knew multiple languages, could read and write, displayed talent as an individual who was a skilled musician with the education required to be skilful in terms of musical composition as well. As she was a fiction character she may be an exaggeration of the ideals of the educated women, however comparison between her and the prolific Marie de France suggests that she was not "...beyond the bounds of credibility."<sup>25</sup>

Central to the Christian thought system was the concept of sin, mankind had become eternally flawed by Eve's Original Sin when she first consumed the forbidden fruit and then convinced Adam to do the same, as a result women were considered to be responsible for the Fall of Man.<sup>26</sup> According to this ideology man was naturally flawed, Eve's actions had condemned him to hell, as such he had to overcome the temptations of sin in order to achieve salvation which would earn him a position in heaven. Of

<sup>22</sup> Robert Norman Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1999), 196-197.

<sup>23</sup> Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 195.

<sup>24</sup> Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 195.

<sup>26</sup> Moller, "The Meaning of Courtly Love," 47.

course as a result of the re-emergence of classical thinking and the changes it had on ideology tensions arose between the church and the new ideas that were affecting social change.

The developing courtly culture can be viewed as a counter culture of sorts originating in Southern France with the troubadour movement and expanding across Western Europe over the course of a couple of centuries. It opposed many traditional values and beliefs of the dominant culture, which as mentioned earlier were defined by Christian theology. The courtly thought pattern did not concern itself with the idea of sin, it did not consider the possibility that man was naturally flawed and as such was not concerned with his salvation, instead anxieties of the courtly individual were based around the recognition of social status.<sup>27</sup> Growing out of a literary movement the quintessential elements of courtly culture can be found exclusively through an analysis of courtly literature.<sup>28</sup> The troubadours and minnesingers produced what their audiences expected to hear, the entire canon of courtly poetry was the product of the interplay between the poets and the courts at which they performed, as such there is a “compulsive” reiteration of limited but prominent themes such as courtly love.<sup>29</sup> The ideal of courtly love created by the troubadours and carried on by their contemporaries played a pivotal role in transforming the perception of women, ladies of the nobility became venerated objects of love, viewed from afar as unattainable goddesses; as such it is important to note that writing from this period which explicitly degrades women most often emerged from a clerical context.<sup>30</sup>

The court centralized society of the twelfth century was a strange period, incredibly savage and lacking any kind of centralized law it set every man for himself, leading to violations of everything. Yet in spite of this brutality there existed a civilizing force based around the noble women of the courts, they established new ‘rules’ for society which men were forced to conform to, in essence they became social judges of both etiquette and behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Women defined the standards for courtly behaviour which led to the creation of the courtier mentioned earlier. An example of this happening in the twelfth century can be seen by looking at Eleanor of Aquitaine, the granddaughter of William IX, she was the most influential and most powerful woman of the century, having been the Queen Consort of France at one time and then later of England. Having been influenced by her predecessor, she gathered poets around her at Toulouse and was alleged to

<sup>27</sup> Moller, “The Meaning of Courtly Love,” 48.

<sup>28</sup> Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Moller, “The Meaning of Courtly Love,” 39.

<sup>30</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 202.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 193.

have established the first Court of Love at Poitiers with her daughter Marie, while the historical existence of this court is debated, it is referred to in Andreas de Capellanus' *De Amore* and was credited for defining the new standards of the nobility during this period.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of whether or not the courts of love existed, Andreas' work reveals the Poitevin code whereby man was property, the very thing of woman a state in complete opposition to the English or Northern French courts which Eleanor was associated with, these views quickly spread throughout Europe, their impact being seen by a substantial decrease in the view that women were inferior.<sup>33</sup> It was at these courts where the ideals of courtly love were established, and the concepts of chivalry redefined; later codified in works such as *De Amore* or the sixteenth century work *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione. The decisions regarding the ideal figures of masculinity and femininity and how they were expected to interact within the court system would provide the basis for characters such as Gottfried's lovers and the nobility of Mark's court.

The end of the eleventh century was marked by an important and unexpected occurrence which played a central role in shaping society. Historically it was expected that the religious enthusiasm of the Crusades would be transmitted back to Europe. However, instead developing first in Southern France there was an aristocratic poetry characterized by anticlericalism, pagan and Arab influences.<sup>34</sup> The growing troubadour movement of Southern France contained the foundations of the ideology of humanism, which would play such an important role in the later Italian Renaissance. It marked a shift in thinking which focused more on human and secular values. The developing courtly society praised human achievements and accomplishments and was primarily concerned with the refinement of the individual, as seen through the expectations that individuals be apt conversationalist as well as skilled combatants in competitions such as the tournaments or other forms of symbolic battle.<sup>35</sup> This leisurely aristocratic society of Southern France was quickly adopted by the rising House of Hohenstaufen (or the Staufer) dynasty of Germany whom are credited with ushering in a "Golden Age" during the High Middle German period, most notably under the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa.<sup>36</sup>

Alongside the rise in appreciation of knowledge, was a rise in the appreciation of the vernacular language, which was epitomized by the

<sup>32</sup> Amy Kelly, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," *Speculum* 12:1 (1937): 12.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," 14.

<sup>34</sup> Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 1036.

<sup>35</sup> McCash, "The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular," 46.

<sup>36</sup> W.H. Jackson, "Courtly Culture and Aristocratic Representation in Medieval Germany: Some Recent Work," *German History* 12:1 (1994): 81.

## 10 CHIVALRY AND HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES (UNDERGRADUATE PAPER)

prolific production of vernacular texts. This led to the creation of a new literary genre: the Romance. The effect of the twelfth century can be seen in the romances, because they showcased the revival of Greek, Latin, and Arabic cultures. As such they were often set within scenes of antiquity such as Troy. These writers considered themselves to be inheritors of classical traditions, another common setting for their romances became the powerful courts based in Europe (England, France, Italy, Germany, etc.) as can be seen through the Arthurian legends where the ideals of the twelfth century were embodied by various iconic knights, thus the tradition could be seen as flowing from Ancient Greece to medieval Europe.<sup>37</sup>

The Arthurian Romance cycle as a genre helped to broaden imaginative and cultural horizons, which created a more explorative self-understanding of contemporary secular aristocracy during the twelfth century, which emphasized the value placed on the individual in the emerging court society.<sup>38</sup> With the rise of the universities and the increased dissemination of knowledge, new centres of literary activity formed. Previously the Church had essentially controlled literary production through monastic settings producing various Latin works, however the rapidly rising courts of the medieval renaissance quickly became the new centers of literary activity, marking a change in literature as their most impressive achievements were written in vernacular languages (such as Occitan, Northern French, etc) not Latin.<sup>39</sup> This “flowering” of courtly literature was not necessarily the expression of the ideals of a refined warrior class; rather it was the product of the renewal of learning which led to a “crystallization” of lordships into emerging dynastic territories encouraging the spread of writing throughout the secular courts.<sup>40</sup> This shift not only created a larger audience for the works being produced; but also created a larger body of people producing literature.

Courtly love was an important theme of twelfth century vernacular authors, claiming a role where it became a necessary requirement of becoming a courtly individual. The idea of love was essential to all vernacular romance works of the period, for example the early Provencal poet Cercamon, warned that, “...a man who despairs of love will find it hard to be courtly.”<sup>41</sup> It played a prominent role in Gottfried’s *Tristan* and while the depth to which it existed in reality is questionable, the prominence of it

<sup>37</sup> Cook and Herzman, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 234.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson, “Courtly Culture and Aristocratic Representation in Medieval Germany: Some Recent Work,” 86.

<sup>39</sup> Cook and Herzman, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, “Courtly Culture and Aristocratic Representation in Medieval Germany: Some Recent Work,” 81.

<sup>41</sup> Joan M Ferrante, “Cortes’ Amor in Medieval Texts,” *Speculum* 55:4 (1980): 688.

during this time throughout literature was definitely evidence that it held a psychological niche within twelfth century society. It is of importance that the texts introduced new notions of women and love, this became the primary impetus for the wave of romances, lais, and lyrical poetry which swept across Europe which became a central and integral part of a new courtly culture that widened its intended audience and patronage, the inclusion of women in a central role became the “sine qua non” of the literature of the High Middle Ages. The troubadours were the first to look at the idea of love in psychological terms, and similarly to modern views, they advocated a “person-to-person” relationship. They separated the concepts of “eros” and “agape,” which they associated with impersonal lovers. The union of which was motivated by sexual desire, from their new concept of “Amor” which provided the foundation for the courtly ideal of personal lovers who underwent a process of falling in love.<sup>42</sup> Andreas Capellanus’ *De Amore* commissioned by Marie de France defined and outlined the ‘rules’ of courtly love. The idea of courtly love was paradoxical: it suggested a love so ennobling that the two lovers involved in such passion rendered themselves entirely to one another, becoming as one. While this intensity of passion was certainly inspiring and represented an idealized concept of love, Andreas maintained that it was not the kind of love that could be found within the bounds of matrimony. It would however greatly influence the behaviour of the upper classes, particularly when around noble women.<sup>43</sup>

The ‘pure love’ of the troubadours was not Platonic, but carnal in intent.<sup>44</sup> This of course created a problem as it meant that the consummation of courtly love would be adultery.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the saving grace of courtly love was the central concept that the love was never to be consummated, indeed Gottfried’s Tristan actually violated the ‘rules’ of courtly love by sleeping with Isolde, ideally his love for her should remain secret and serve as a source of inspiration. By looking at three different cases involving marriage brought before the great ladies of the courts it is apparent that courtly love was not a disruptive force amongst court society, instead marriage and ‘pure love’ could coexist, as the judgements passed by these women made it clear that adulterous love was not intended to disrupt the marriage bond but was meant to coexist with it.<sup>46</sup> This is supported by the fact that contemporary authors such as Marie de France in her *lais* such as *Chevrefoil* showed little indication of concern regarding the extra-marital love experienced by her

<sup>42</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 186

<sup>43</sup> Moller, “The Meaning of Courtly Love,” 39.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander J Denomy, “Courtly Love and Courtliness,” *Speculum* 28:1 (1953): 44.

<sup>45</sup> Denomy, “Courtly Love and Courtliness,” 46.

<sup>46</sup> John H Fisher, “Tristan and Courtly Adultery,” *Comparative Literature* 9:2 (1957): 150-151.

## 12 CHIVALRY AND HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES (UNDERGRADUATE PAPER)

characters, and offered no indication of disapproval.<sup>47</sup> The contrast between “shameful suspicion” considered to be a vice among husbands and “noble jealousy” which was considered a virtue in a lover, supports this mindset.<sup>48</sup>

Courtly love became an ennobling source of inspiration for men. Due to the fact that this love was not to be obtained, it could become the source of personal and spiritual inspiration. After all, the restraint from sexual desire would further refine the individual.<sup>49</sup> Especially amongst the clergy, who espoused the idea of a “battle for chastity,” they considered women to be a temptation to men, which if one could restrain from then he could improve himself as an individual. This allowed the clergy who were now expected to remain celibate an opportunity to discuss the idea in military language, connecting them to the “heroic culture” aspects that remained within society as well as connecting them with the idea of refinement brought in with the medieval renaissance.<sup>50</sup> The female love object of various nobles played an extremely important role in courtly society, literature, and presumably in ideal practice they would become the central figure for which the knight was completing his deed, she became the basis of his quests, his love for her became the source of inspiration for his actions.<sup>51</sup>

Noble women played a crucial role in the rise of the vernacular language, while Latin was associated with men there was a trend among noble women who preferred to read in French instead. As a result of this noble women became patronesses of various vernacular authors, who with their financial help produced numerous works of various different genres in the vernacular languages. It was under the patronage of these women that the Arthurian materials and the new concepts of love that developed in the courts of Aquitaine blended inextricably and became a seamless addition to Western Literature.<sup>52</sup> Noble women became the addressees of various romance works and became the overwhelmingly dominant subject matter of popular vernacular literature most prominently within the sphere of lyric poetry. However as patronesses they also became the instigators of translation which played a crucial role in raising the status of the vernacular language due to requests for older Latin works to be translated into the

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Black et al., *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Volume 1 – The Medieval Period*, (Peterborough: Broadview, 2009), 181.

<sup>48</sup> Fisher, “Tristan and Courtly Adultery,” 151.

<sup>49</sup> Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 1038.

<sup>50</sup> Jacqueline Murray, “Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity,” in *Holiness and Masculinity*, ed. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 32-33.

<sup>51</sup> Cook and Herzman, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 232.

<sup>52</sup> Diana B Tyson, “Patronage of French Vernacular History Writers in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” *Romania* 100 (1979): 185.

vernacular tongue.<sup>53</sup> This played a significant role in the transfer of ancient knowledge from the clergy to the courts, exemplifying the value now placed on education and knowledge of the classics.<sup>54</sup> Noble women also requested translations of Latin histories, which were essential to their role in shaping the new courtly culture, for the first time women, were seen as asserting their role in the preservation of history, becoming arbiters of courtly taste and behaviour, marking a significant development in the history of Western culture.<sup>55</sup>

The daughters of Eleanor of Aquitaine are evidence of the extremely influential role women had in the spread of vernacular language. Mathilda of Saxony, (her eldest daughter by Henry II) through her marriage to Henry the Lion of the Welf dynasty; helped popularize ideas of courtly love and tales of King Arthur in Germany, scholars have claimed that she acted as the patroness for Eilhart von Oberg's *Tristan* (most likely the oldest German account of The Tristan Legend).<sup>56</sup> The Minnesinger ("love singers") movement was extremely influential during the golden age of the Hohenstaufen emperors. The minnesingers for the better part of a century raised the statues of noble women in Germany, as can be seen in the words of Walther von der Vogelweide (or "of the Bird-Meadow") who claimed that, "German ladies fairs as God's angels; anyone who defames them lies in his teeth."<sup>57</sup> They inspired an aristocracy that created a culture more refined than anything that Germany had known and would not known again until the rise of Schiller and Goethe during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>58</sup> Eleanor of Castile (another daughter by Henry II) can similarly been seen as spreading the ideals of courtly love and romance literature through Spain.

Marie de France (a daughter by Louis VII), made a significant contribution to vernacular literature. She was the first woman for whom a reasonably extensive canon (most likely incomplete) of vernacular language was associated earning her praise as, "perhaps the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages and certainly the creator of the finest medieval short fiction before Boccaccio and Chaucer."<sup>59</sup> Marie de France's most noteworthy contribution to literature was her development of the *lais*, which were short narrative poems which followed the troubadour tradition. *Chevrefoil* for

<sup>53</sup> Alison Cornish, "A Lady Asks: The Gender of Vulgarization in Late Medieval Italy," *PMLA* 115:2 (2000): 167.

<sup>54</sup> McCash, "The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular," 52.

<sup>55</sup> McCash, "The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular," 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 1041.

<sup>58</sup> Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 1039.

<sup>59</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. by Robert Hanning & Joan Ferrante (Durham, NC, 1978), 1.

example was a *lais* by Marie de France associated with the Tristan cycle. Literary critics suggest that the adoption of the *lai* with its folk tale influences was a mark of innovation that would be responsible for the first explicit revision in European literary history; Marie clearly exemplified the impact noble women had on vernacular literature.<sup>60</sup> Marie's work provided a distinctly female voice and commentary.<sup>61</sup> Male romance writers focused on discussing the subject of love in relation to chivalric pursuits, the tension that arose between the two and the need to establish a balance to become the kind of refined individual the court expected. Marie's work instead focused on the personal desires of her characters, her *lais* traditionally depicted intensely intimate love relationships and explored the internal motivations of her characters, particularly the female ones.<sup>62</sup>

The twelfth century renaissance was a period of social and cultural refinement, an ideal of courtly behaviour was established in Southern France and disseminated through the vernacular works of the troubadours, these new ideals became popular in Western society and quickly spread across Europe having a profound effect on the role of noble women in society. The vernacular languages took center stage during the twelfth century; they dominated the literature of Europe during this period creating the new genre of Romance which espoused the ideal of courtly love. Gottfried's *Tristan* and *Isolde* epitomize the virtues of the twelfth century renaissance, presented as paragons of courtly society, both characters were extremely well educated possessing a level of knowledge seldom obtained in reality. The lovers represent the cultural refinement of the period through their multilingualism and incredible skill in the art of music. *Tristan* exemplifies the shift from previous ideals of knighthood to a more refined chivalric courtier, *Isolde* is the object of his love, and she becomes the source of inspiration for all of his actions. *Isolde* is the epitome of courtly maidenhood, mirroring important contemporary figures such as Marie de France or Heloise, *Isolde* was viewed as the perfect courtly woman. Gottfried von Strassburg, a German minnesinger wrote his version of *Tristan* during the twelfth century, which was regarded as the finest retelling of the *Tristan* legend, distinguished as a masterpiece of High Middle German literature. His story exemplifies the paradoxical nature of courtly love by having the lovers actually consummate their love, by doing this Gottfried is able to expose some of the social issues that arose as a result of this form of literature. Literature serves as the primary lens through which an analysis of courtly society and culture during the medieval renaissance can be made, by looking

<sup>60</sup> Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 198.

<sup>61</sup> Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 197-198.

<sup>62</sup> Black et al., *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Volume 1 – The Medieval Period*, 181.

at the ideals espoused in *Tristan* and other works of the romance period it is possible to gain greater insight into the values held to be most important by society

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