Lovely Violence

Lovely Violence:
Chrétien de Troyes' Critical Romances

By

Jørgen Bruhn

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Lovely Violence: Chrétien de Troyes' Critical Romances,
by Jørgen Bruhn

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2492-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2492-7

I dedicate this book to my parents Ole and Rigmor Bruhn,
Helsingør, Denmark

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

The preface of this book is not the first to excuse the fact that a new title on Arthurian literature is being published. Brigitte Cazelles' *Unholy Grail*, published in 1996, opens with a 1920 quotation of Jessie L. Weston: "In view of the extensive literature to which the Grail legend has already given birth it may seem that the addition of another volume to the already existing *corpus* calls for some words of apology and explanation."[1] This is true, and even more true today, as not only Weston and Cazelles, but also Bezzola, Bloch, Busby, Frappier, Haidu, Hunt, Kelly Krueger, Köhler, Lacy, Loomis, Pickens, Poirion and Vance, to mention a few, have spent considerable time and energy producing an impressive corpus about Arthurian literature in general and Chrétien's text in particular. The 500 pages of the yearly *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* is an all too telling sign of the almost frightening exuberance of the contemporary Arthurian industry. So how, to put it bluntly, can I possibly contribute to the already extensive amount of readings of Chrétien's books?

I hope that my background in modern literary studies and literary theory might help me to construct an understanding of Chrétien de Troyes' works that is stimulating for the contemporary reader. I will contribute to the efforts of my predecessors by trying out my own approach to the strange, fascinating – and funny! – texts of the mysterious figure that we have agreed to call Chrétien de Troyes. I am not trained as a traditional medievalist, and therefore I have been forced to invent my own approach to the romances as I went along. This has caused me quite a few problems, but may in hindsight also have given me the possibility of seeing things I would have otherwise ignored. The method I propose is a combination of traditional close reading (of particular elements) of the texts combined with what might be called a generalist approach to some of the problems, an approach that medieval specialists might consider problematic. Compared to the medievalist giants that have preceded and enabled my book, admittedly, my work does not look particularly impressive, but standing on their shoulders does enable me to see things that might deserve to come to the knowledge of a wider audience.

What caused me to start working on Chrétien's texts was the amazement I felt when reading the ancient texts and feeling how, without

any problems, they bridged the time gap between my twentieth- and twenty-first-century experiences and the literature of the late twelfth century. As a reader trained in modern literature and literary theory I was fascinated by the fact that Chrétien's texts addressed *me* as well as the women and men of the twelfth century for whom they were conceived. I enjoyed, and I continue to enjoy, his sense of irony and his metafictive moves, and I could easily comprehend what I consider his indignation and mistrust of the chivalric ideals he presumably encountered in his everyday life. My favourite author, Marcel Proust, and his partly fascinated, partly disgusted description of his contemporary bourgeoisie sprang to mind. The more I delved into the intricacies of Chrétien's five romances, the more it became clear that I would not be able to compete with my experienced medievalist-predecessors in producing new and revolutionary results. Neither could I let myself commit all the blatant anachronistic errors that can so easily occur, when one is not familiar with a historical epoch. But I could not let myself give up the project before it had even started, and in this particular sentiment of rather low medievalistic self-esteem, and a healthy dose of optimism, I started out on the journey of which this book was to be the destination.

A few common traits will appear in most of my analyses of the romances; I will not miss the crucial aspect of irony in a number of disguises in his texts, nor will I ignore (most aspects of) the sophisticated structure, in particular on a micro-level, his *conjointure*, of his texts. But the central thematic idea of my work concerns the well-known fact that the romances of Chrétien emerged in a milieu and in a historical epoch where a social group, the rather brutal warriors, were about to transform themselves into a civilised society of ethically committed knights. This transformation was too magical a fact for the clear-sighted Chrétien, who again and again stresses that the knights were mounted warriors, trained to kill first and converse or be courtly later. And not only are the knights basically warriors, they are also part of a social group defined by a number of internal contradictions. The readings I will propose, following some of the important studies I have come across, pursue these internal, unreconciled conflicts. What interests me in the contradictions in Chrétien's *literary* texts is that they signify important ideological contradictions of the epoch, even though I will be rather careful when making such statements. In order to control the drift towards abstractions and historical statements based on a few literary facts, I have chosen to consider each of Chrétien's romances under one specific heading, while at the same time trying to sketch the overall meaning of the texts. But I cannot and will not offer comprehensive analysis of the rich texts.

Thus I treat some specific themes in what follows. In Chrétien's first romance *Erec et Enide* I will focus on Chrétien's position in relation to some of the epoch's discussions concerning the question of fiction, in particular concerning the relation between authority, fiction and truth. I will show that Chrétien seems to engage in a subtle playful relationship with one of his authoritative predecessors in order to carve out his own place in the contemporary discussion concerning truth and authority. In my reading of *Cligès* I discuss its relation to the widespread debates about the story of Tristan and Iseut. Chrétien deals with this scandalous and ideologically infected motif by reinterpreting one particular aspect of the story, namely the question of virginity. He ironically establishes the paradoxical possibility of being unfaithful while remaining a virgin, which is Chrétien's way (in this particular text) of reflecting on the nature of love. In my interpretation of *Le chevalier de Lion* I will discuss the way violence and chivalry are linked together by Chrétien in order, I will suggest, to de-romanticise the idea of chivalry as the ideal of the epoch. I will show that *Yvain* is far from establishing the harmonious closure that apparently seems to be the case. The intimate relation between anti-social violence and true chivalric behaviour is a fact that cannot be neglected, Chrétien seems to stress. Not even a marriage to the socially attractive widow Laudine, or the relation to a symbol of self-sacrificing strength, symbolised in the lion, can change that fact.

When commenting on Chrétien's *Le chevalier de la charrette* I will follow most of the earlier commentators of the romance when I read it as an answer to and criticism of the Tristan and Iseut story. Besides that I will show that Chrétien, as in *Yvain* (and written, probably, at the same time), is interested, first of all, in the question of the perfect knight, which turns out to be a rather problematic concept. Furthermore, I am interested in diagnosing Lancelot's apparent problems in dealing with the complexity of the world surrounding him.

Perceval ou le Conte du Graal is normally considered the unfinished but harmonious (in the sense of religious), conclusion of Chrétien's oeuvre. In this evaluation lies hidden a vaguely formulated idea that the first four novels do indeed betray signs of the internal contradictions and problems mentioned above, which haunt Chrétien's texts. The religious zeal that, rather surprisingly, is foregrounded in *Perceval* is considered both a conclusion to the contradictions of the earlier romances and a serious attempt at "saving" the idea of chivalry that in the end is purged of its unruly violence and egotistic exhibitionism. Consequently, a new chivalric ideal lingers on the horizon, not too far, perhaps, from Bernard of Clairvaux's vision of a new Knighthood. I do not think that this is the

point of Chrétien's book, and I will argue that Chrétien did not wish to close the gaps between ethical ideals and chivalric reality he had opened in the previous texts. On the contrary, my argument is that Chrétien may have vaguely felt that the healthiest sign of a blossoming culture is the courage not to deny or repress its inner contradictions. This tendency of Chrétien's text is also the reason for the subtitle of my book: I consider the most appropriate genre definition of Chrétien's texts to be "critical romance".

Principles of Reading

When writing on Chrétien's critical romances, I aim at regarding them as functioning in three distinct but simultaneously existing, non-hierarchical dimensions: an entertainment dimension, a religious dimension and a political dimension.

In the courtly milieu where Chrétien presumably spent most of his life, having been educated, probably, in a cathedral school), the romances of Chrétien were, first of all, part of the courtly entertainment. Chrétien wrote his romances in order to entertain and amuse a diverse audience consisting of men and women, clerics, knights and all the less well-defined members of a twelfth-century court. Chrétien addressed, and faced, a heterogeneous audience of individual subjects, and each of these constructed a particular "reading" of the text according to his or her own needs.[2] We might, with Stanley Fish, use the term "interpretive communities" here. Some parts of the audience wished to hear a good story, others wanted to learn about love, others wished to hear once again the tales of the historic past. Some members of the audience knew fragments of the story; others did not, some would be "experts" in recognising irony and subtle jokes, while others would take the story at face value. I am well aware that this category, this "interpretive community", is very broad indeed, but I wish to hold on to this basic fact of "narrative desire" (Peter Brooks) and general wish fulfilment inherent in reading romances.

Apart from this entertainment level, Chrétien's texts also entered the comprehensive religious discourses of the period, and the listener and the writer have, willingly or not, entered the religious realm in their reading/rewriting of the text. Any text conceivable at the time was interpreted in order to establish whether the text was in harmony or in conflict with Christian dogmas. In other words, the religious discourse was impossible to escape. But that is not the same as saying that religious dogmas were all-dominant. Different ways of reinterpreting reality in the

mental periphery of Biblical teachings were produced all the time.[3] A religious or metaphysical reading of, for instance, *Yvain* would concentrate on the interpretation of the lion. It would identify good and evil powers in the text, and it would probably construct Yvain as a representative of the sinful man, finally changing his ways after a religious epiphany.

There is, however, a third layer of signification in the texts. *Yvain*, to continue the exemplification from above, also contains a number of traces, critical reflections, of the era in which Chrétien lived. The chivalric texts reflect, like any text in any historical context, their socio-historical and mental milieu. The texts are, consciously or not, part of and more or less refracted representations of the society in which they are born. Reading on this third level of the text facilitates an analysis that can supplement the insights which a focus on the other levels can provide. This is the case not only because the level of entertainment (elegance, joyfulness, etc.) and religion (symbolism of all sorts) is already well-represented in the comprehensive scholarly literature on Chrétien. It is in particular so because this third reading strategy enables the reader to move behind the "official" ideas of the text and its milieu. I use, in other words, the third level to read signs in the texts as symptoms of other contextual relations. Doing so, I am aware that I am probably not re-establishing the conscious intentions of the writer, or the interpretations of any particular reader in Chrétien's time. I will conclude, though, that even if my third level reading seems to stress my own contemporary interest in the problems of the chivalric ideology, it does appear as if Chrétien constructed his critical romances in order to obtain a specific (and very self-confident) position. In my introductory chapter following this preface I shall try and sketch out my way of understanding the context of Chrétien, thus also making more substantial the three interpretive communities described above.

Reading like this is not an original strategy in contemporary literary scholarship, not even when it comes to medieval literature. The medieval text has been read as a symptom of socio-historical, epochal tendencies (perhaps starting with Erich Köhler), it has been seen as signs of psychoanalytical "symptoms" or mechanisms (see for instance Huchet's *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse: Pour une clinique littéraire*, 1990), as ventriloquating the epochal shift between oral custom and written law (Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law*, 1977), as typical of anti-representative, meta-fictive tendencies (Peter Haidu, Karl D. Uitti and many others). Lately, in a wave of influential readings, medieval literature has been considered under the heading of a wide variety of gender issues (Barbara L. Krueger, Sarah Kay and Simon Gaunt). Consequently, the medieval text, and perhaps Chrétien's romances in particular, have thus

been a kind of changing microcosm mirroring the larger (or smaller!) world of literary theory in the last forty or so years.

The underlying argument in my book is, thus, that Chrétien's work offers widely differentiated perspectives on high medieval society and thinking, filtered through his particular way of negotiating with the past sources, his rhetorical and philosophical learning, and his obvious desire to create fabulous tales. Apart from the framing parts (on context, and the opening and closing chapters) the five readings of Chrétien's particular romances are designed to be able to be read in isolation, even if a larger structure will, hopefully, appear to the reader who reads the book in its entirety.

I could not, however, have managed to write this book without crucial helpful hints, references to books, and critical readings along the way. There are too many helpful colleagues to be listed here, but I must mention just a few. Professor Brian Patrick McGuire, whose indefatigable and visionary way of living the Middle Ages has been an inspiration to me, in particular in the first, very confusing steps en route to my project. My impressively learned and open-minded colleagues in the small medieval network that was set up at the University of Copenhagen were crucial too. I had the pleasure to let my work be presented, criticised and later on published under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of the Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals in Copenhagen, directed by Professor Nils Holger Petersen. I have presented my work and received valuable comments in different places in Denmark, too, and the acknowledged scholars Dennis Green, Sylvia Huot and Simon Gaunt had the kindness to read and comment upon a few chapters of my work during a visit to London and Oxford in 2004. In the final process of editing and proofreading Henriette Thune helped me find hundreds of small – and larger – faults. All the blunders of this book must, however, remain mine.

Most of all, though, I am immensely grateful to the Carlsberg Foundation, Copenhagen, who gave me the possibility of pursuing my interest for three years without any other obligations than reading and writing.

Notes

[1] Brigitte Cazelles, *Unholy Grail: A Social Reading of Chrétien de Troyes's Conte du Graal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 11.

[2] To define this reception is extremely difficult, but the main characteristics were that it was oral, collective and, as far as we know, often only took place once. In other words, the reception of texts in the Middle Ages was the direct opposite to the way a modern academic reads the text (alone, in silence, several times). One of the groups of receiving subjects, namely women, has been the subject of a thorough investigation, where the difficulties of reconstructing the reading situation, and the influence on the particular interpretation(s) of the text, are stressed. See "The Displaced Reader: The Female Audience of 'Old French Romance", in Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Simon Gaunt, in *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), constantly takes into consideration the problem of the reader, but without addressing the problem the same way I do in three distinct layers of reception.

[3] Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the Middle Ages was one of the first, and definitely the most influential, to point to these counter-discourses of the Middle Ages. His position has, however, been subjected to severe criticism, for instance by Dietz-Rüdiger Moser in "Lachkultur des Mittelalters? Michail Bachtin und die Folgen seiner Theorie" in *Euphorion*, 1991. See also Elena Nährlich-Slateva and Aaron J. Gurjewitsch, in the following issue of *Euphorion*. A balanced approach to the Bakhtinian idea of the Middle Ages can be found in Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, orig. 1981).

CHAPTER ONE

THE QUESTION OF CONTEXT

In this introduction I will try to answer a question that seems to be relatively simple but turns out to be very complicated, namely: what is the relevant context for the texts of Chrétien de Troyes?

In the last two or three decades a number of arguments have made problematic the very idea of explaining a work of art by its context. Studies of historical phenomena – medieval studies being just one of these – have had a tendency to neglect the problematic relationship between the individual work of art, the "contextual" surroundings and the interpretation of the interrelation between these two entities. Contemporary cultural theory, informed by semiotics and phenomenology, raises several problems concerning these issues, and it will be useful to refer a few key passages from Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's influential "Semiotics and Art History" from 1991,[1] where the traditional idea of context is discussed. They cite, among others, Jonathan Culler's reflections on the idea of context:

> But the notion of context frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches the discussion [about context], since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act. We know, of course, that things are not so simple: context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events. Yet whenever we use the term of *context* we slip back into the simple model it proposes. (Culler quoted p. 175)

Bal and Bryson stress the fact that the context is itself a text consisting of signs that are to be interpreted. Therefore one must be careful not to believe that the context can simply "explain" the meaning or the genesis of a work of art: "it cannot be taken for granted that the evidence that makes up 'context' is going to be any simpler or more legible than the […] text upon which such evidence is to operate" (p. 177). Culler's (and Bal/Bryson's) solution to the problem is to transfer the idea of context to

the concept of "framing" instead, meaning that "one might try to think not of context but of the framing of signs: how are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms?" (Culler quoted p. 175). Not in order to abandon altogether the idea of any kind of relation between a work of art and its historical surroundings, but in order to clarify the fact that the context is a construction. Context is a textual and signifying frame that the scholar construes in the best possible way – that is: a frame with the largest possible explanatory effect. In terms familiar to most readers trained in contemporary "theory" (or in classic hermeneutics!), the reader can only read from a position coloured by his or her own context (or frame!) and the reader is therefore to some extent responsible for the context or frame that he or she construes. One does not *find* a context – one *constructs* a frame. In my book, therefore, the term "context" ought to be read in quotation marks, being synonymous with a framing that, from my point of view, seems productive.

These considerations are more than abstract ponderings since my work deals with texts remote in time and with a very problematic access to the traditional devices of contextualisation because of the relatively few details known about "Chrétien". This only makes the deliberate construction of my own frame all the more important. What interests me, to repeat my remarks in the introduction, is "Chrétien's" description and negotiation of the main concepts of love and chivalry, and in doing so, "Chrétien" is a typical product, it seems to me, of the so-called *twelfth-century renaissance*. Therefore I will, in my framing below, describe the main tenets in the idea of this proto-renaissance, try to mention important aspects of the period's ideas about love and marriage and, furthermore, briefly sketch the idea of courtly life and chivalry. But first a few words about the author "Chrétien".

Framing the Author

In the 1960s Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault famously criticised the idea of the author, and they showed that the connection between a biographical subject and the writings attributed to this subject is far from being simple. Bal and Bryson stress that, according to Foucault, "the relation between an individual and his or her own proper name is quite different from the relation that obtains between a proper name and the function of authorship" (p. 180). By doing so, Foucault (and Barthes in a parallel manoeuvre) deconstructed the direct link between work and (an autonomous) subject, but even such a deconstruction is unfortunately

impossible when it comes to a medieval author like Chrétien, about whom we know almost nothing. Chrétien is, actually, a perfect example of the disconnection between a biographical subject and a corpus of writing: an author who we know exclusively through his words.

Chrétien – whose texts we read in versions prepared by scribes (an autograph text by a medieval French author is not to be found until the fourteenth century) – remains an almost empty concept despite the efforts that have been made to establish his identity, and the problems concerning his identity are paradoxical because the texts of Chrétien are extremely focused precisely on the meaning of names and the central function of naming (a general topic in much medieval literature). Together with the question of the sources for Chrétien's texts (the dominant question amongst scholars until around the start of the twentieth century[2]) everything concerning Chrétien's name can be guessed about, and theories as to his identity abound.

Modern scholars, as well as medieval readers and listeners, must rely on a few passing statements in the prologues and epilogues of the romances that have subsequently been classified Chrétien texts. In *Chevalier de la Charrette* he calls himself "Chrestïens de Troies", in his other texts simply "Chrétien". But is "Chrétien" a name – or a description of the religious leanings of a man? And Troyes: does it refer to Chrétien's place of origin (i.e., in the province of Champagne): or did he live a period of his life in or near Troyes – in the Middle Ages a renowned place for markets because of its position between the North (Flanders and England) and the southern regions, and a "multicultural" setting of different languages and cultures of the merchants coming from all over "Europe"? Or should Troyes be read as a reference to the ancient Troy, thus to the mythic origin of Rome (according to Virgil), and thus entering the central idea of *translatio imperii* so fascinating to a number of clerks and rulers alike? Furthermore: did he choose it himself (so that the name expresses a meaning chosen by him) or was it given to him? The fact is that it is a rather unusual name, even though Daniel Poirion mentions a few occurrences of similar names, which has made scholars wonder if the name refers to a newly Christianised man: "Le nom semble avoir été donné, et cela paraît logique, à des convertis, notamment à des juifs convertis".[3] The fact that the Jews are heavily criticised, for instance in *Perceval*, is only – according to this explanation – the zeal of the newly converted (ibid.). And for Poirion, Chrétien's interest in subtle word games and subtle constructions of his texts might be a sign that he had been trained in a Talmud school. We don't know, I am inclined to say: and future research into these matters will, I believe, remain inconclusive.

Other aspects must be taken into consideration, and one of the few certainties when it comes to constructing a rudimentary historical context is the mention of a few historical persons in the prologues, notably Marie de Champagne (mentioned in *Chevalier de la Charrette* as the one under whom he works, thus establishing a connection that can probably be trusted[4]) and Count Philippe of Flanders (mentioned in *Perceval*). These two references seem to suggest with some certainty that Chrétien wrote his texts in the last third of the twelfth century. But if these historical dates facilitate an outer frame, their internal meaning cannot be taken literally, even if it is tempting to speculate on the role of Chrétien in Marie de Champagne's famous court, where he *could have* met Gace Brûlé, Gautier d'Arras and even the author of the notorious double love treatise, *De Amore*, Andreas Capellanus (whose presence at the court is not beyond doubt, though).[5] In the work of an author where in principle everything can be tainted with Chrétien's famous ironical tone, even the references to Marie and Philippe are problematic: Do they express true gratitude or rather a codified gratitude? Or are the historical figures to be considered exempla (thus pointing to important thematic references in the texts)? We will never know.

From a typical contextual frame very little comes to the fore, in other words, but in the texts themselves one of the most important traits referring to "Chrétien" is no doubt the signs of learning and academic training which show that Chrétien must have been what we normally call a clerk, i.e., a man who was trained in the cathedral schools but did not go on to be ordained as a priest, instead earning his living by way of his reading and writing capabilities so that he could, with his education, be used as a counsellor and efficient administrator. The training in the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric) is obvious in his writings (where Ovid and Virgil are often mentioned), whereas the *quadrivium* (mathematics, music, astronomy, geometry) cannot be ascertained, even though he does discuss Macrobius in *Erec* (see my discussion of this reference in chapter 2).

A Twelfth-Century "Renaissance"?

But let us take as an irrefutable starting point that "Chrétien" (whoever he was) lived and wrote his texts in the northern parts of France in the High Middle Ages. Or, with an expression commonly used concerning the time and place (and works of Chrétien), the so-called Twelfth-Century Renaissance. In order to create a suitable frame around Chrétien's texts, I will dwell on some of the characteristic features of the epoch. The renaissance term was used in connection with the twelfth century as early

as the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it gained wider acceptance after the publication of Charles Homer Haskins' book *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* from 1927, where Haskins argued that the twelfth century was characterised by a rise in academic learning, artistic expressions in architecture and literature and scientific endeavours, and manifested itself in institutions like the early university structure in Italy and France, making the development of the period comparable to the "real" renaissance of the fifteenth century. Another way of defining the epoch, though more sceptical about the content of the term, was offered in the invitation to a multidisciplinary conference in 1977 on the idea of a medieval renaissance arranged by Benson and Constable who, later on, edited *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (1982):

> What is meant by the term renaissance? Can it be said to have had a beginning or an end? In what areas of learning and knowledge was its impact primarily felt? Can it be understood exclusively in terms of a revival of classicism? Did it involve broad changes in point of view, such as attitudes toward God, the world, and the self? Was it associated with a new view of history? a new sense of change and progress? a willingness to accept innovation? Did these in turn contribute to the emergence of new secular values?[6]

The epochal concept is, in other words, difficult to define, but in a more recent work introducing the period, R. N. Swanson's *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, 1999, a definition is nevertheless put forward: Swanson works with a "long" twelfth century – from 1050 until 1250 – and geographically he believes that this early European renaissance does not only concern north-western France. He also finds renaissance elements in Germany and Spain. Therefore he criticises Haskins' traditional definition:

> the time has come to discard the notion of a single, all-embracing twelfth-century renaissance, whose impact is assumed to be Europe-wide. The unitary phenomenon needs to be replaced by a series of more closely defined movements which more accurately reflect the way in which understanding of the twelfth-century world has changed since 1927. (Swanson, pp. 6–7)

Swanson confronts the issues concerning the reason for the blooming of culture and science in the epoch when he claims, that "[w]ithout falling into a determinist trap, perhaps the key feature in the general European context between 1050 and 1250 was the massive economic transformation", "a fundamental transformation, perhaps best summarised as commercialisation" (p. 7). This commercialisation was a result of an

agricultural revolution consisting of new technologies (in particular the plough), better climactic conditions which led to a remarkable rise in productivity. all in all leading to a remarkable rise in population.[7] The significant urbanisation is another important factor, because the re-emergence of a European monetary economy and the enhanced trade following the agricultural progress and the convenient money transaction, again makes the towns the centres of the new development.

In a discussion concerning the rise of courtly literature, Ann Buckley has described this development:

> With the more rapid growth of towns, the barter economy recedes and a mixed economy develops; more diverse services are required and offered, and money increasingly replaces payment in kind. The use of money, and the development and diversification of services, draw more and more people into a "web of interdependence".[8]

This web of interdependence – a Norbert Elias term – means new ways of living under more narrow conditions, forcing people to engage in new patterns of behaviour living side by side in the towns and at court in the castles (but one could argue, though, that village life also places people side by side under spatial restraints).

Another characteristic way of living together under the new, self-imposed constraints was the very popular and widespread movements of piety, which marked a radical critical stance towards the growing mercantilism, and whose supporters therefore lived out their *imitatio Christi* in new communities. The hermits and the recluses – and Chrétien depicts quite a few in his romances – were on the one hand trying to avoid and transgress the idea of the individual but by doing exactly this, one could argue, they took the individualism of the epoch to its extreme. The new piety amongst men as well as women also led to several changes in ecclesiastical structures, a kind of (multiple) pre-Reformation of the Church – as well as a very robust mobilisation, for example in the ideology of the Crusades. The fact that the European territories in the High Middle Ages were finally not under the threat of violent external sieges (of Vikings, Muslims, or Magyars) opened the possibility for "Europe" (Latin Christendom) to start gathering as an external, efficient unit, not only as an abstract unity but also as an aggressive unit moving beyond its borders.[9]

In other words, the renaissance of the twelfth century – the "long" twelfth century – also express itself in the Crusades' aggressive raids on the East, on the other side of the Mediterranean, Outremer. The so-called "armed pilgrims" fought in what was construed as a "just war" against the oppressors of their "brothers and sisters" in the Holy Land.[10] The militant

reinterpretation of the (hitherto more or less pacifistic) Christian ideals expressed the Papacy's wish to show leadership in the emerging "European" community, and it was, paradoxically, at the same time an attempt by the Church to continue the peace endeavours (the *Peace of God*, protecting non-combatants from private warfare, and the *Truce of God*, restricting warfare on, for instance, holy days). This conflict between peace-loving politics and sheer aggression might be among the main targets of Chrétien's critical discussion of the chivalric codes, most vehemently, perhaps, in *Perceval.*[11]

The discussions concerning the chivalric codes and the ideas of the Christian knights are crucial in the period, and in particular the violence of the chevaliers was, according to Maurice Keen in his standard work *Chivalry*, an important topic of discussion in both aristocratic and ecclesiastical circuits: "in the eleventh century, the church authorities were becoming more concerned with the direction and limitation – and in due course with the canalisation – of martial energies" (Keen, p. 48). Bernhard de Clairvaux was among the most famous and most prolific propagandists for a new chivalry.

The Crusades were, to start with, a project of the "French",[12] but were nevertheless one of the first historical situations where something vaguely reminiscent of a European community emerges. But for this very reason it can also be considered under the heading of meeting the Other. Several modern historians have considered these meetings – violent, most often! – as crucial for the European "identity". Important in this tradition is R. I. Moore's polemical *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 1987, which is formulated in contrast to the more edifying ideas of the epoch described in R. W. Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages* from 1953 – Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* seems to occupy a middle position in the discussion. Another important work is the art historian Michael Camille's book *The Gothic Idol*, 1991, which tries to develop a critical description of the rise of a European mentality:

> Western Europeans in this period sought to define themselves against the Other; against a past Other, the pagans, whose culture still permeated medieval texts and images; against a foreign Other, the Muslims, whom they had been fighting for more than a century in order to regain the Holy Land; and against a domestic Other, the Jews, who denied the Faith right before their eyes. (Camille, p. xxix)

Several times in my argumentation I shall return to this concept of proto-European mentality as being based on the Other, and for my discussions it

seems very suitable, in fact, to describe some of the contradictions inherent in the chivalric class and behaviour in these terms. The knights populating Chrétien's texts define themselves very much in opposition to "Others"; often the so-called *vilains*, which is a pejorative term designating, basically, everything that is *not* chivalric. But the knights also seem to produce a conception of themselves in this very mirroring of the vilains, and as well in other knights – and even in women. I will define this idea as Chrétien's *dialogical* description of the subject, in my reading of *Yvain.*

Individualism?

A common denominator in several accounts of the period is an emphasis on a growing understanding of the individual. According to Swanson, the three-order model proposed by medieval thinkers (and brought to renewed interest in G. Duby's writings[13]) increasingly turns out to be a simplified model with its three orders – *oratores, bellatores, laboratores* – the ecclesiastical order *praying* for the community, the chivalric order *fighting* against external enemies and bringing internal public order, and the order of the peasants and other "vilains" *working* manually. Swanson points to the fact that several typical figures of the twelfth century cannot be included in these three orders, and characteristically, the book edited by Jacques le Goff, *L'Homme medieval*, 1989, explicitly argues against the tripartite model in order to create a more complex picture of "medieval man". Consequently, le Goff engaged a team of internationally recognised historians to describe the *ten* typical figures of the Middle Ages: the monk, the knight/warrior, the peasant, the city dweller, the intellectual, the artist, the merchant, the woman/the family, the saint and, finally, the (group of the) marginalised.

In Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200*, 1972, and in Robert Hanning's *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*, 1977, the individualistic tendency of the epoch is described in detail in theology and literature, whereas Howard Bloch, in *Medieval Literature and Law*, focuses on individualism as the result of the role of new tendencies in medieval law:

> As an important element of what has been termed "the Renaissance of the twelfth century", the personalization of criminal responsibility was part of the tendency toward legitimization of the concept of individualism evident across a broad cultural spectrum in the writings of monastic reformers; the revival of Classical studies; renewed interest in letter writing and autobiography; the personalization of portraiture and sculpture; altered

> notions of intention, sin, and penance; the popularity of personal (mystical) religious experience; the appearance of the singular heroes of late epic and satirical forms; and, as we shall see, the valorization of the individual within the courtly novel and lyric.[14]

Morris, Hanning and Bloch agree on one point: in order to understand the epoch, individualisation must be taken into consideration, and I would add: in order to understand Chrétien's critical romances, the individualising tendency is all-important. Brigitte Cazelles, when reporting the main points in Morris and Hanning, also speaks of the "discovery", or with John Benton the "rediscovery"

> of the individual in twelfth-century Europe, leading to a renewal of personal ethics. According to Colin Morris, a dominant interest in the private and personal, rather than the public and communal, aspects of the self emerged during the period. Provoked by the challenges posed by an increasingly complex society, which demanded a capacity of individual evaluation, criticism, and initiative. (Benton, p. 22)[15]

Individual *choice* becomes crucial, as well as individual responsibility, and the chivalric class is therefore also discussed under the new paradigm of individualism. Cazelles again: "That the nature of true knighthood, for example, was an object of intense discussion testifies to the difficulty of determining one's place and function in a society whose values were increasingly experienced as varied and unstable" (Cazelles, p. 22). The increasing individual sensibility was also one of the factors making the individualistic chivalric romance more popular in, and more representative of, the twelfth century, than the epic, for instance the *Chanson de Roland.* The *Chanson de Roland* expresses a collective code of conduct, whereas "the essential quality of the protagonist of chivalric romance appears to be his capacity to confront, understand, and control the world that surrounds him" (p. 22). That this individualism *avant la lettre* may even turn out to be problematic for a number of Chrétien's protagonists (not heroes!) is one of the main assumptions behind my work.

Courtly Life

An element or perhaps a result of the individualistic tendency was the increasingly blooming life at the courts, which created a special code of conduct called, among other things, *courtoisie.* The term and its definition is much debated, but in Jean Frappier's classic article "Vues sur les conceptions courtoises dans les littératures d'oc et d'oïl au XII^{e} siècle" a relatively sober overview can be gained. Frappier starts out by pointing out

that "l'idéal courtois" is typical of (French) twelfth-century culture, and Frappier carefully underlines that the idea of courtliness can only be understood when considered as both a *social* phenomenon (a "tournant de la civilisation" (p. 1)) and a *literary* phenomenon. Frappier stresses the individualistic aspects of courtly culture and courtly literature in comparison to the foregoing epic form. The first definition of courtoisie is that it has a distinct relation to life at court, and the special way of living at court, which Frappier defines as "un raffinement des moeurs, luxe, politesse, belles manières, respect des bienséances, soins empressés auprès des dames qui dans les cours donnent le ton des relations sociales" (p. 2). These characteristics produce a certain courtly code of conduct, a new set of manners which becomes part of a more comprehensive civilisation spreading in European culture.

Here Frappier's thesis resembles C. Stephen Jaeger's investigation of the idea of courtliness which is based upon the socio-historical system of Norbert Elias, although Jaeger points to another source for the courtly culture.[16] Ann Buckley, referring to Elias's ideas on courtly literature, stresses that the courts became the sites of the emerging individualism, and furthermore, that the complexity of court life necessitated new measures of organisation, a task fitting the educated clerks of the period: "Courts become increasingly complex institutions", she points out, and they "become potential centres of literary patronage and potential centres for historiography. Outside of the monasteries, court patronage is at the time the only means of livelihood for those whose profession is specialised in writing and composing – there being no book market as yet" (Buckley, p. 189). The courts, mainly the greater, wealthier courts, offer a certain way of life "in secular society, [where] a large number of people, including men, lived together in constant close contact in a hierarchical structure, under the eyes of the central person, the territorial lord" (p. 190).

This sociological fact was central for Elias, because this condition demands a considerable change in personality. On the inner level the men of the period, being used to sorting things out by resorting to violence, must change their pattern of behaviour. A strong self-control is necessary, a psychological fact theorised by Elias in Freudian terms (superego). On the external plane, this psychological restraint on the violent means of solving problems turns out to encourage new sophisticated and stylised forms of life. And at the same time the role of women (who were often, and for long periods, deserted by their husbands, either because they had taken up the cross or were otherwise engaged far from home) takes on more responsibility and they thus occupy a more central role (the role of women will be discussed below). It is in this courtly milieu, where literacy

was still a relatively scarce competence, and where relatively new forms of behaviour struggled with older, more "primitive" life forms, where women were trying to carve out a role for themselves, that we might imagine a figure like "Chrétien" perhaps finding his feet as a writer and as an administrative employee.

The origins of courtly culture are also a much debated topic: Does it originate in the sophisticated courts of the Iberian Peninsula "occupied" by Muslims? Does the increasing importance of the women, and thus "feminine" values, play a crucial role, or is the growing role of the women the effect of the courtly ideals? Should we follow Elias's rather speculative construction of the courtly culture as part of a *Zivilisationsprozess*? Or should we rather consult the influential ideas of Stephen Jaeger?[17] The research field seems to be very open at the moment, but I will offer a cautious definition saying that elements of courtly culture slowly developed into the ethics of a social group and even consolidated into a specific stratum of medieval society, basically by solidifying its privileges and considerable possessions by hereditary rules. Here I am following the works of Georges Duby, as well as the above-mentioned authors, even though I tend to believe that Duby overestimates the speed and change in the hereditary traditions (leading to a patrilineal pattern) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[18]

I shall discuss courtliness and courtly love in several places in my book and I will follow Frappier in his practical distinction between *courtliness* as a code of conduct and social evaluation, and *courtly love*, which he consider to be a kind of concentrated essence of courtliness.[19]

The famous, or infamous, courtly love, is defined by Frappier as "un art d'aimer inaccesible au commun des mortels"; it is an "embellissement du désir érotique" and it is on the one hand a discipline even developing into a "religion de l'amour" (p. 3). But courtly love is also a highly debated term, and R. Howard Bloch even speaks about "a critical chaos surrounding courtly love" (Bloch, p. 215). Unlike Old French terms for *courtoisie*, the term *amour courtois* is not a medieval term: it is a modern terminological invention, created by Gaston Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century.[20]

The term designates a particular relationship between man and woman, and most of the knowledge of the phenomenon comes from literary sources: the troubadours of southern France and the trouvères of northern France. It has even been claimed that "courtly love" was the earliest invention leading to the modern concept of "romantic love".[21] The relationship is characterised by the fact that the male party in the relationship is subordinate to the female party's every wish, and

furthermore that the "typical" relationship is characterised by a hierarchy; the man ought to be socially inferior to the woman. The love of the man is a worship of the women, a so-called "service d'amour", obliging every possible wish of the woman, even the ones that seem the most irrelevant or even unreasonable.[22] This humility, probably untypical, to say the least, of normal relations between man and woman in the period, is the expression of true love. Performing this love relation has a crucial effect in courtly ideology: it honours the woman (and thus expresses a refined spirit) but the very love service has an elevating effect on the loving man, making him a truer, courtly man.

It has been remarked by several historians that this love relation seems to imitate the hierarchical structure of so-called feudal society, and that it might even be a direct expression of feudal hierarchy. Frappier mentions this too, but the theory is not without its complications: how should we, for instance, understand Frappier's remark that the "service d'amour" "se calque sur le service féodal dû par le vassal au seigneur" (10)? It is beyond doubt that the legal vocabulary of feudal society has entered the discourse (and ritualised movements) of love, but how can such a direct relation be proven, and what is the basic character of this relation? Not to mention the critique from – most prominently – Susan Reynolds concerning the idea of feudalism as being a concept without roots in reality, thus tearing down the basic sociological model (feudalism) that has been basic knowledge for generations of medievalists.[23] Another problem that has been raised and hotly debated, as mentioned above, is the very existence *outside literature* of courtly love. Chrétien engages in the debate, obviously, but as I will show, he does it in a characteristically probing, questioning way.

It is extremely difficult to establish Chrétien's intention concerning the idea of love in his romances. My working thesis is that Chrétien's five romances function as a complicated, and irresolvable, pattern of divergent views (comparable, also in that sense, to "Marie de France's" highly varied ideas of love expressed in her *Lais*). Instead of stating a clear view on love, he seems to construct his romances in order to test several, internally contradictory views. In his first romance, *Erec et Enide*, the main theme is the danger of loving too much and thus risking the fate of losing one's chivalric honour. In the subsequent romance, *Cligès*, we find, on the other hand, some of the most direct and unironic descriptions of love, and the force of love is described in rather traditional terms as an edifying force, in the sense that love can encourage the chivalric ideals of man. In *Yvain* and *Lancelot*, probably written continuously, side by side, passages warn on the one hand of not forgetting love instead of the chivalric ideals (in *Yvain* – even if the marriage is saved in the second

"attempt"), but in *Lancelot* Chrétien lets the ideal of marital love be subsumed under the heading of betrayal in the love relation between Lancelot and King Arthur's lawful wife Guenevere. And in the final romance, the Grail romance of *Perceval*, the amorous endeavours are fused into a Christian quest. This variety in Chrétien's romances makes it almost impossible to speak of one intention behind the texts. Thus the textbook distinction between the southern troubadours' positive description of infidelity and the northern writers' positive approach to a combination of love and marriage does not, I believe, apply to Chrétien.

A central question related to courtly love and courtly culture is the position and rights of the women. At first glance, courtly culture led to an improvement in the rights of women because of the central position occupied by the loved and adored lady. But numerous critical voices have been raised in order to warn against this conception. First of all, it seems naïve to imagine that the married men in the patriarchal system of the High Middle Ages would let themselves be "cheated" so easily. In Georges Duby's discussions of love and marriage – and the position of women – in the Middle Ages, he repudiates the idealistic concepts of the new role of women. According to Duby, the love triangle (husband, wife and lover) was not controlled by the wife, nor by the lover. The controlling force lies with the (only apparently) absent husband, who leads the love affair in the direction and on the level that accords with his wishes (see below).

Juvenes – Women and Marriage

In order to understand some of the basic traits of the relations between love, marriage and the role of women I will take as a point of departure Duby's well-known thesis on the new social class emerging in the twelfth century, the group of so-called *juvenes* (Latin) or *les jeunes*. Because knights from around the turn of the millennium are changing into a more stable class based on hereditary laws instead of fighting for the privileges in each generation, several aspects begin to emerge. First of all the family (in the wide medieval sense of the word, i.e., a household, with a nuclear family with satellites of relatives and servants circling around mother, father and children) became the basic unit of the chivalric class, because heritage was part of the family privilege. And furthermore it became crucial for every possessing family to try to minimise the number of possible heirs in order to keep the possession under one name and in a strong monolithic unity. That is why, Duby says, the practice of primogeniture (the first-born son inherits the family possessions) turns out

to be the common way of solving the problems of inheritance. The step is taken from a *horizontal* net of useful alliances and privileges under the control of the highest feudal power (who could donate fiefs after the death of one of his vassals) to a new *vertical* form where the diachronic line of family is the most important factor of distribution from generation to generation. This is the important change in sociological conditions from the beginning of the eleventh century in north-western France, which produces a new social group, the *juvenes*, *les jeunes*: that is, the young men who do *not* receive an inheritance and who are therefore forced to either enter the Church or try to fight their way into a good family; young, restless and potentially dangerous young men who were normally organised in gang-like groups on "vagabondage".[24] They were on the lookout for honourable and/or economically prolific adventures in officially arranged tournaments or elsewhere: "Pendant toute son errance, la bande des jeunes se trouvait animée par l'espoir du marriage."[25] With a marriage (and a child) the young knight errant changes into a mature man who has avoided the dangerous and stressful transition "entre l'adoubement et la paternité".[26] These young men were an element of violence and instability in the period, and "[v]ouée à la violence, la 'jeunesse' constitue, dans la société chevaleresque, l'organe d'agression et de tumulte"[27] – and the young men themselves also live a highly dangerous existence, often leading to a violent, premature death.[28]

According to Duby, the emergence of this new social group has a number of significant consequences. The Crusades, despite earlier attempts, were launched at the end of the eleventh century, and they were endorsed by the Church, partly in order to demonstrate leadership while at the same time continuing the efforts to create a (more) peaceful society, as mentioned above. But the Crusades were also a useful way of redirecting the violence of the young semi-knights into a more respectable fighting class of Christian warriors. Instead of wasting Christian blood, Moslem blood should be the result of the young men's eagerness. The young men's vigour should change from *malitia* to *militia*, from malice to a Christian, militant army.[29]

The existence of this social group also led to a new interest in love among the established aristocracy. From the more established aristocracy an ideal of love that blurred the real arranged and political nature of marriage became useful for the seniors of the families. A new pseudo-ideology of true love gives the impression that love is the ruling factor in the marriages (and uniting the families is simply a side-effect). The point is that the *juvenes* should stay on a distance, not too close to the wife of the houses of *lonh amor*, "distant love", to use with the key troubadour