The Beginnings of Medieval Romance

Up to the twelfth century writing in the western vernaculars dealt almost exclusively with religious, historical and factual themes, all of which were held to convey the truth. The second half of the twelfth century saw the emergence of a new genre, the romance, which was consciously conceived as fictional and therefore allowed largely to break free from traditional presuppositions. Dennis Green explores how and why this happened, and examines this period of crucial importance for the birth of the romance and the genesis of medieval fiction in the vernacular. Although the crucial innovative role of writers in Germany is Green's main concern, he also takes Latin, French and Anglo-Norman literature into account. This study offers a definition of medieval fictionality in its first formative period in the twelfth century, and underlines the difficulties encountered in finding a place for the fictional romance within earlier literary traditions.

D. H. GREEN is Schröder Professor Emeritus of German at the University of Cambridge. He is a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and of the British Academy. He is the author of *The Carolingian Lord* (1965), *The Millstätter Exodus* (1966), *Approaches to Wolfram von Eschenbach* (1978), *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (1979), *The Art of Recognition in Wolfram's Parzival* (1982), *Medieval Listening and Reading* (1994) and *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (1998).

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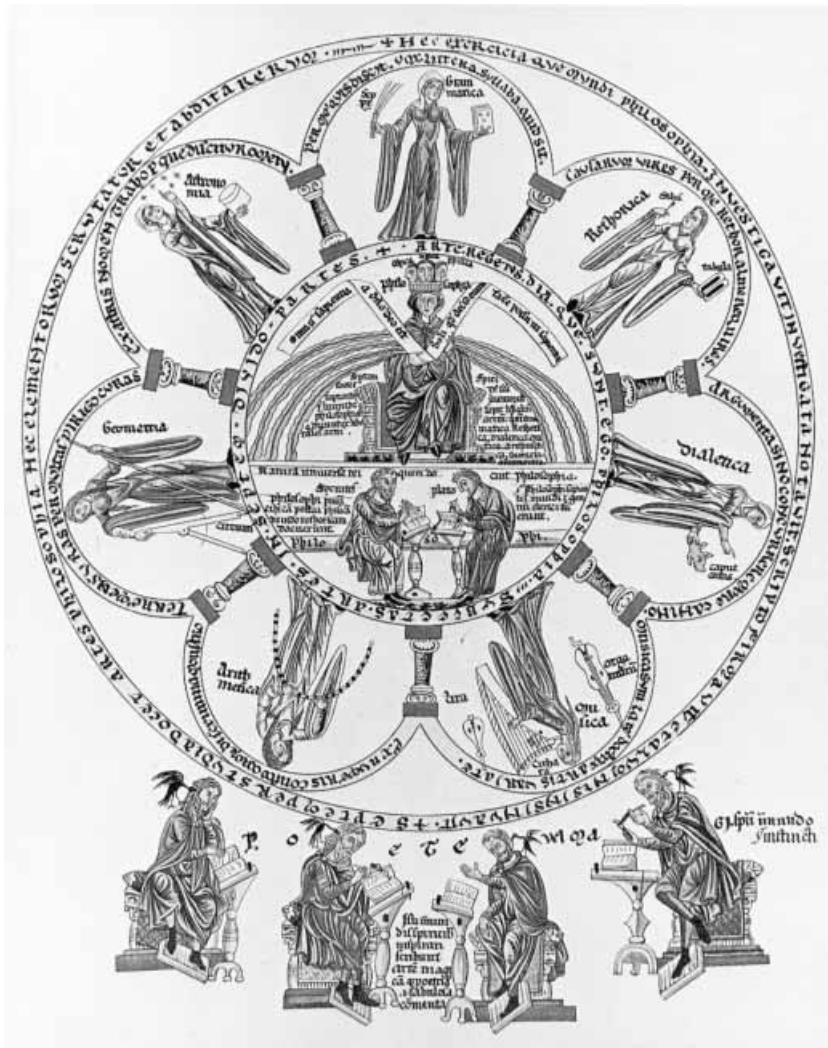
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The centre is dominated by Philosophia, inspired by God. Beneath her sit Socrates and Plato, and around her are grouped the seven Liberal Arts. Excluded from this circle of truth and wisdom are four figures of poets, the authors of untruthful fables and inspired by unclean spirits.

The Beginnings of
Medieval Romance

Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220

D. H. GREEN
Trinity College, Cambridge

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The problem of fictionality has come to the fore recently in research on the medieval German romance, even though, surprisingly in view of the seminal importance of Chrétien de Troyes, the same is not so true of French scholarship. The two most important representatives of German scholarship in this field are W. Haug and F. P. Knapp. Haug confines himself to medieval authors' reflections as found in prologues and digressions, whilst Knapp offers a more theoretical approach to problems of genre. By contrast, my aim is practical rather than theoretical (how did various authors make use of the potentialities of fictionality in organising their narratives?), but also genetic rather than generic (in concentrating on the period 1150–1220 I focus on a short period of crucial importance for the birth of the romance and of medieval fiction in the vernacular). German narrative fiction after 1220 reacts to the preceding generation, it rings changes on it, deviates from it, parodies it, but scholarship dealing with this later fiction suffers from the lack of consensus over the nature of narrative fiction before 1220. Like Knapp, I am convinced that the time is too early for a systematic treatment of this complex problem, so that, like him, I deal with it in interrelated approaches, homing in on it from different angles.

A word needs to be said about another delimitation of the problem. I am concerned with the emergence of fictional writing in the twelfth century in one genre alone, the romance. This means excluding from consideration such genres as the *chanson de geste* and the lyric, for to have included these as well would have been unmanageable within the confines of one book. Only when the problem has been dealt with for all three genres can their interaction and interdependence be worked out. But that is a task for the future.

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For similar reasons of space, and also to safeguard a clear line of argument, I have omitted (apart from a specific point treated in Chapter 3) any consideration of the connection between fictionality on the one hand and the interplay between orality and writing on the other. In an earlier book (*Medieval listening and reading*, Cambridge 1994) I devoted a chapter to literacy, history and fiction, but looked at the last two specifically from the point of view of literacy. What also needs to be done is to look at literacy (and orality) from the point of view of fiction, but that, too, is a task for the future.

This is the place to clarify two points in the terminology used in this book. I employ the word 'fictional' to mean pertaining to fiction as defined in Chapter 1 and as a property of some vernacular writing around 1200, whilst I use the term 'fictitious' (only very occasionally) in a broader sense, meaning that which has no real existence, and not necessarily applied to a work of narrative literature. I also distinguish between 'fiction' and 'fictionality', using the former to designate a specific example or body of fictional writing, and the latter to refer to its nature, to what sets it apart from other types of writing, especially of a factual or historical kind; where the occasion calls for it I also at times employ, as was also medieval practice, *poetria* or *poema* as equivalents for *fictio* or *figmentum*.

The second clarification concerns romances dealing with a theme from classical antiquity. Since examples exist both in antiquity itself and in the Middle Ages I refer to the former as 'romances of antiquity' and the latter as 'antique romances' (in specifically French cases as *romans antiques*). Since the term 'classical' has established itself as a designation for a group of German authors around 1200, distinguishing them from their 'post-classical' successors of the thirteenth century, I use the word 'classical' in this particular sense.

Whatever the restrictions (chronological and generic) I have felt it necessary to impose on my inquiry, it is wider in another sense since, although my first concern is German, I have also had to take in evidence from Latin, French and Anglo-Norman literature. This has given me the pleasure of ranging far and wide beyond my specialist field, enjoying what was already appreciated by Dante as the *ambages pulcherrimae* of Arthurian literature.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to Mark Chinca and Nigel Palmer for reading through all the chapters in draft form and for giving me the benefit of their critical comments, as well as Laura Pieters Cordy for her skill with the computer and for not being daunted by the number of the endnotes. I also have to thank the Max Niemeyer Verlag for permission to reproduce, in modified form, as part of Chapter 3 my contribution to *Blütezeit. Festschrift für L. Peter Johnson zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. M. Chinca, J. Heinzle, C. Young, Tübingen 2000).

Abbreviations

ABÄG	*Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*
AfB	*Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*
AfdA	*Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum*
AfK	*Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*
AL	*Arthurian Literature*
ANS	*Anglo-Norman Studies*
BDBA	*Bien Dire et Bien Apprendre*
CCM	*Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*
CIMAGL	*Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen Age Grec et Latin*
CL	*Comparative Literature*
CLS	*Comparative Literature Studies*
DVjs	*Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*
FEW	*Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. W. von Wartburg, 24 vols. to date, Bonn 1928–83
FMS	*Frühmittelalterliche Studien*
FS	Festschrift
FSt	*French Studies*
GLL	*German Life and Letters*
GRLMA	*Grundriß der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*
GRM	*Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*
IASL	*Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der Literatur*
JAAC	*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*
JEGPh	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JWCI	*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*
LiLi	*Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*
LSE	*Leeds Studies in English*
LwJb	*Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*

Abbreviations

MA	*Moyen Age*
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
ME	Middle English
MGH SS	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*
MHG	Middle High German
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MPh	*Modern Philology*
MPL	J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*
MR	*Medioevo Romanzo*
NdJb	*Niederdeutsches Jahrbuch*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
NT	*De Nieuwe Taalgids*
OFr	Old French
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. C. O. Brink *et al.*, Oxford 1968
OS	Old Saxon
PBB	*Paul und Braunes Beiträge*. (*T*) stands for the Tübingen series.
RF	*Romanische Forschungen*
RPh	*Romance Philology*
SLF	*Studi di Letteratura Francese*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
WW	*Wirkendes Wort*
ZfdA	*Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*
ZfdPh	*Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*
ZfrPh	*Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*
ZGL	*Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik*