

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse
Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*The displaced reader: the female audience of
Old French romance*

Il faut y reconnaître, chez les grandes dames de ce temps où apparaît ce qu'on appelle 'le monde,' un effort pour créer et faire accepter aux hommes un amour idéal et raffiné, nullement platonique toutefois, et fondé sur la pleine possession, mais ne laissant aux sens qu'une part secondaire, étroitement lié à la pratique et à l'accroissement des vertus sociales, et donnant à la femme, à cause du risque qu'elle courait en s'y livrant, une supériorité constante qu'elle justifiait par l'influence ennoblissante qu'elle devait exercer sur son amant.

(Gaston Paris)¹

UNDER THE SIGN OF WOMEN: THE RISE OF ROMANCE

One of the most seductive images that Old French courtly romance has generated about its origins is that of a woman or women as the source of its fictions. For Gaston Paris, writing over one hundred years ago, the female patrons of early courtly literature could be seen as active instigators of a social and literary movement that ushered in a revolutionary concept of love in northern France in the second half of the twelfth century.² Not only did these women inspire the production of lyric poetry and commission the writing of romances, but they also promulgated a sentimental and social ideal that empowered them with new-found influence – “une supériorité constante” – over the lives of men.

Taking as evidence the numerous poems, love treatises, and romances that are dedicated to or inspired by historical female personages, foremost among them Eleanor of Aquitaine and her

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

daughter Marie de Champagne, Paris and his successors articulated an influential theory of women's participation in the creation of courtly ideology.³ As late as 1977, the feminist historian Joan Kelly contrasted the loss of power by women in the Renaissance with the relative autonomy and sexual freedom enjoyed by noblewomen in the courtly tradition in the Middle Ages.⁴ Despite historical and critical arguments to the contrary,⁵ the notion that courtly literature represented a sort of Golden Age for women continues to find adherents.

The number of works *en romanz*, or in the vernacular, dedicated to women suggests that women were indeed involved in the formation of northern courtly literature.⁶ Some of the earliest translations from Latin were apparently done at the behest of powerful women: Benedeit's *Le Voyage de Saint Brandan* was dedicated in different manuscripts to Queen Matilda and to Queen Alice (Adeliza of Louvain), first and second wives respectively of Henry I of England.⁷ Philippe de Thaon dedicated his *Bestiaire* to Queen Alice (c. 1120) and re-dedicated it (c. 1154) to Eleanor of Aquitaine; his *Livre de Sibille* (after 1135) was also written for an "empereis," probably the empress Matilda.⁸ Benoît de Sainte-Maure's early prototype of a chivalric romance, *Le Roman de Troie* (c. 1160), contains an apostrophe to a royal woman that we shall soon discuss. By the time Chrétien dedicated one of the most influential Arthurian romances, *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* (c. 1177), to Marie de Champagne, the link between vernacular narrative and women readers and listeners was well established.

As verse romance flourished from 1160 to 1300, numerous works contained dedications or allusions to female patrons or readers, usually in the Prologue and Epilogue (see Appendix). If we add to these examples instances of an *anonymous* female reader, often a beloved *amie*, whom the author describes as the inspiration for or source of his story, the evidence for a kind of female patronage or "matronage" mounts. Whether or not the dedicatee was a fictional or real individual, when the poet wrote for his lady in the hope of finding favor through a pleasing performance, he wrote under the sign of a woman.

In a precious few instances, a portrait of the female patron

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The displaced reader*

3

has been preserved in a frontispiece or historiated initial portraying the benefactor. The Guiot manuscript of Chrétien's romances presents a female figure who may well represent Marie de Champagne in the opening initial of *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* (B. N. fr. 794, fol. 27)⁹ (figure 1). Adenet le Roi's *Cleomadés*, in Arsenal manuscript français 3142, begins with a stunning depiction of Marie de Brabant, queen of France, and her sister-in-law Blanche de Castille with the poet (figure 2). Adenet says in his Prologue that he heard the story from the ladies.¹⁰ The frontispiece of Girart d'Amiens' *Méliacin* in Bibliothèque nationale ms. français 1633 presents a similar royal group centered around a woman¹¹ (figure 3). The visual image of a lady in the illustration framing the romance enhances the link between author, text, and patroness set forth in Prologues and Epilogues.

Finally, and no less remarkably, we find numerous examples within the fictions themselves of women characters who act as storytellers, readers, or interpreters of events in ways that seem to reflect the literary and interpretative activities of women within the audience. If women's literary participation is defined in the broadest sense as being part of a social context out of which literature was produced, and as being part of the audience to whom literary texts were directed, then there is impressive evidence that women were implicated in romance's creation.

But the presence of women in the audience and as dedicatees does not prove either that individual female patrons exerted a formative influence upon the composition of particular romances, or that the genre promoted women's interests. Courtly fiction was written by male clerics who supported the values of male aristocratic culture. The genre arose in northern France in the latter half of the twelfth century at a time when noblewomen's powers within feudal society and the family were in many respects declining, as we shall see. Women's privileged status in the frame of the romance accompanied her *displacement* from legal and social agency.

Indeed, a closer look at the ways in which romance inscribes women as source, patron, or reader, reveals that female

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

transmission and reception of the genre are not as straightforward as they might at first appear. Let us consider the case of two very different narratives that are close to the origins of courtly romance: first, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie*, a massive "translation" and amplification of Latin texts purporting to transmit eyewitness accounts of the Trojan War;¹² and second, *Le Conte de Floire et Blancheflor*, a brief, idyllic tale of a pagan boy, Floire, and a Christian girl, Blancheflor, who overcome love's obstacles.¹³

As one of the first vernacular fictions with a strong authorial presence, Benoît's *Roman de Troie* marks an important step in the development of courtly romance's literary self-consciousness.¹⁴ It also marks the beginning of the woman reader as a problem. In his intriguing dedication, located near the mid-point (lines 13457–70), the narrator turns to address a "rich dame de riche rei" (line 13468) and enumerates her sterling qualities. The passage has commonly been read as a flattering dedication to Eleanor of Aquitaine, a recognized patron for many early works.¹⁵ It has been used to date the poem from between 1155 and 1160, shortly after the dissolution of Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII of France in 1152 and her remarriage to Henry II Plantagenet. Benoît's dedication would have been written well before Eleanor's fall from her second husband's favor, which resulted in her virtual imprisonment for twelve years (1172–84).

Read in context, however, the passage works as much to undermine female authority as to acknowledge a powerful patron. These lines occur in the midst of a third-person account of Briseida's emotions as she is forced to leave her lover Troilus for the Greek camp (lines 13429–512). Dismissing the young lady's momentary distress in one line, Benoît launches into a digression on how Briseida's feelings will soon change for the better: "Mais, se la danzele est iriee, / Par tens resera apaiee; / Son duel avra tost oblié" (lines 13429–31) ("But, if the damsel is upset, she will soon be satisfied again; she will soon forget her sadness"). He then moves from this proleptic pronouncement to a misogynistic generalization about the fickleness of all women who "cry out of one eye and laugh with the other" ("A l'un ueil plore, a l'autre rit," line 13442). Even the wisest, says Benoît,

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The displaced reader*

5

acts foolishly, forgetting in three days what she has loved for seven years (lines 13444–46). After dwelling on female inconstancy for twenty-five lines, Benoît, fearing that he may have offended his female reader, attempts to make amends by praising her irreproachable morals. It is here that Benoît portrays the “riche dame” whom scholars have identified as Queen Eleanor:

De cest, veir, criem g'estre blasmez
 De cele que tant a bontez
 Que hautece a, pris et valor,
 Honesté e sen e honor,
 Bien e mesure e sainteé,
 Enoble largece e beauté;
 En cui mesfait de dames maint
 Sont par le bien de li esteint;
 En cui tote sciënce abonde,
 A la cui n'est nule seconde
 Que el mont seit de nule lei.
 Riche dame de riche rei,
 Senz mal, senz ire, senz tristece,
 Puisseiz avoir toz jorz leece! (lines 13457–70)

(In truth, I fear that I may be blamed for this [= Benoît's comments about women's fickleness] by one who has so much goodness that she has glory, wisdom, honor, merit, moderation, and holiness; in whom the misdeeds of many women are eclipsed by her goodness; in whom all knowledge is abundant, who has no peer in any land on earth. Noble [powerful] lady of a powerful king, without harm, or anguish, or sadness, may you always find happiness!)

One might well ask why Benoît placed his dedication at the moment of Briseida's betrayal. Did he wish to prevent comparison of Briseida's two loves with those of Eleanor by insisting on his patroness' exceptional virtues? For modern readers, his denial might have the opposite effect. In any case, the author's motives and the historical identity of the dedicatee remain a matter of speculation. Although Benoît's name has survived in several places in the poem (lines 132–34; 2065; 5093; 19207), Eleanor of Aquitaine's name is never recorded. Eleven of twenty-seven manuscripts do not contain this passage, and in

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

one, the scribe has described the woman in question as a “riche fille de riche rei,” the Virgin Mary.¹⁶

Whatever the author’s aims might have been in so dedicating his work to his lady, the *effect* of Benoît’s address to his female reader seems less to dispel questions about his representation of female nature than precisely to raise them. The problem is further compounded in the lines that immediately follow his praise, where, quoting Solomon, he digresses for another twenty-five lines on the rarity of finding a woman who is both chaste and beautiful (lines 13471–94): “Beauté et chastée ensemble/ Est mout grief chose, ço me semble” (“It seems to me that it’s very difficult to find beauty and chastity together [in one woman]”). He elaborates upon the dictum “Qui fort femme porreit trover/ Le Criator devreit loer” (“Whoever is able to find a strong woman should praise the Lord,” lines 13473–74) before returning to his original subject, Briseida’s sorrowful departure.

Benoît’s “apology” to his patroness is backhanded. Ascribing extraordinary virtues to one exceptional woman only confirms the rule of woman’s “essential” inconstancy. Two extended antifeminist diatribes of equal length frame Benoît’s flattering portrait of his patroness.

What is remarkable about this digression in its entirety (lines 13429–94) is the way that it so conspicuously problematizes the woman within and beyond the text. It calls into question both the narrator’s representation of female desire in the character of Briseida, and the nature of his female reader’s response to it. Even as Benoît generalizes about how women act from his omniscient knowledge of one of them, he acknowledges that his assumptions (presumably shared by males in the audience) may fail to please at least one important lady. By suggesting that “she” may be at odds with this representation, he raises questions about how women might respond to stories told about them by men.

At the heart of one of the earliest romances, Benoît’s dedication inscribes the problem of gender and interpretation. The clerk signals the female reader’s centrality to the project he is undertaking: “she” is the only member of the audience whose

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The displaced reader*

7

response he so engages. At the same time, he signals her displacement from its ethos: given his patently antifeminist framing, it is unlikely that “she” would unequivocally support this performance. By highlighting her possible disagreement and distance, Benoît paradoxically acknowledges the separate realm of her desires. He inscribes his female audience as an “influence,” not because of any particular doctrine she has imparted to him, but because of the anxiety engendered in him by the possibility of her opposing interpretation. The powerful lady’s reception, like Briseida’s affections, cannot be fixed to a single meaning.

An equally intriguing inscription of female audience appears in the Prologue to the *Conte de Floire et Blancheflor*, which takes the interesting form of a diptych.¹⁷ First, the narrator makes an initial rousing appeal to his audience of lords and ladies who have suffered in love to hear the story of Charlemagne’s grandparents. This “Carolingian” prologue (lines 1–32) provides a conventional genealogical opening. Then, in a second introductory frame (33–56), the narrator describes how he has entered the “chambres des dames” for postprandial sport with the ladies and comes upon two sisters telling a love story:

En une cambre entrai l’autrier,
 un vendredi après mangier
 por deporter as damoiseles
 dont en la cambre avoit de beles.
 En cele cambre un lit avoit
 qui de paille aornés estoit.
 Molt par ert boins et ciers li pailles,
 ainc ne vint miudres de Tessaile.
 Li pailles ert ovrés a flors,
 d’indes tires bendes et ours.
 Iloec m’assis por escouter
 .II. dames que j’oï parler.
 Eles estoient .II. serours;
 ensamble parloient d’amors.
 Les dames erent de parage
 cascune estoit et bele et sage.
 L’aisnee d’une amor parloit
 a sa seror, que molt amoit,
 qui fu ja entre .II. enfans,
 bien avoit passé .II. cens ans.

(lines 33–52)

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

(I entered a chamber the other day, a Friday after dinner, to amuse myself with the damsels, of which there were beauties in the room. In the room there was a bed which was adorned with a spread. The spread was beautiful and costly, no better ever came from Thessaly. The cloth was worked in flowers, of blue silken bands and borders. I sat down to listen to two ladies I heard speaking. They were two sisters: they were speaking together about love. The ladies were noble, each was beautiful and wise. The elder spoke to her sister about a love affair between two children, which had happened a good two hundred years ago.)

Situating this event in the recent past on a particular day (“l’autrier,/ un vendredi après mangier”), explaining his own motives (“por deporter as damoiseles”) along with his assessment of the ladies (“dont en la cambre avoit de beles”), and describing in some detail the richly embroidered cloth adorning the bed (lines 37–42), the narrator creates the illusion of a “real” world of privileged female experience as the frame for fiction. At the center of the frame, apparently undisturbed by the narrator’s intrusion upon an activity that had been going on independently of him, two sisters “bele et sage” speak about love, the elder telling the younger a story whose outlines (“d’une amor ... entre .II. enfans,”/ “bien avoit passé .II. cens ans”) resemble the story we are about to hear. The sisters’ high birth and their instruction (“parage,” “sage”), the elder sister’s knowledge of a story that has occurred over two centuries ago, and her oral transmission of it to the younger woman, would all seem to support the view that an oral, female tradition of storytelling among learned courtly ladies was one of the “sources” of courtly romance.

But the narrative agency within this compelling scenario of feminine influence shifts abruptly in the Prologue’s last lines:

*Mais uns boins clers li avoit dit,
qui l’avoit leü en escrit.
Ele commence avenanment.
Or oïés son commencement.* (lines 53–56)

(*But a good clerk had told her, who had read it in writing. It begins in an agreeable fashion. Now hear its beginning [emphasis mine].*)

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The displaced reader*

9

These lines not only correct our understanding of the provenance of this particular story – the sister heard it first from a clerk who had read it – but also transform thereby an oral source into a written one, a female source into a male one. They also underscore the necessity of clerical intervention in the transmission of culture: “*mais uns boins clers li avoit dit...*” The line that we might have been tempted to read as evidence of female tradition over some years (“*bien avoit passé .II. cens ans*”), now reads as the opposite. Because the events happened so long ago, the lady could only have known of it from a clerk, whose vocation it is to transmit the past in written record. The “*mais*” dispels the illusion of female autonomy in the story’s creation, an illusion so poignantly evoked in the details of the narrator’s description. Female speech is no longer an original source but a secondary one, derived from the ultimate authority of the clerk’s writing. At the very moment that the narrator begins his own *mise en escrit*, he deflates the power of oral female presence whose world he has infiltrated to assert the primacy of clerical writing, and the transmission of culture between men.

Yet even as the lady’s power as source or origin dissolves in the narrator’s own *écriture*, the women’s presence remains a problem in these lines. We wonder whether the love story we are about to hear follows the sisters’ oral version or its clerkly written source (“*Ele [?] commence avenanment*”), and why the narrator would have found it important to gesture as he has towards feminine influence in this second Prologue. The earlier Carolingian opening serves perfectly well to introduce the material and to command the attention of a mixed audience of knights and ladies. In the initial Prologue, the author claims to tell “his” story unambiguously: “*Se mon conte volés entendre*” (line 5); “*Or sivrâi mon proposement*” (line 31). To what effect, then, does the text interpolate this secondary scene in the ladies’ chambers? Why project a possible “female” origin for a Carolingian legend? Does the speaker accrue a special authority by showing himself deftly penetrating feminine space and appropriating sisterly discourse? Does he thereby appeal to his audience’s desires, giving male listeners a voyeuristic share in

Cambridge University Press

052161936X - Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance

Roberta L. Krueger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the eavesdropper's pleasure and providing women with a flattering image of female creativity?

Ultimately, such authorial motives remain undiscernible for *Floire et Blancheflor*, as for most verse romances of the period.¹⁸ *Floire's* narrative voice, which cannot be located in a single historical author, is an elusive trace of subjectivity. But the questions the passages raise are no less real for that. This problematic inscription of women within the text invites us ultimately to ponder gender relations beyond the text, in the audience of "chevaliers" and "puceles" invoked in the opening lines. Projecting a privileged female speaker as "source" of the story and then displacing her, the Prologue highlights the distance between women's experience and the fictional worlds created and transmitted by clerks.

Although their particular textual strategies and contexts are very different, the inscriptions of female audience in the *Roman de Troie* and *Floire et Blancheflor* raise significant questions about the relationship of women readers to their respective fictions. Appearing to inscribe a woman in a central position in the story, both fictions ultimately displace their female readers from the act of fictional creation. Within the romances, the female characters are similarly displaced from the center of narrative action. Briseida, daughter of a seer who has foreseen the Trojan demise, is exiled against her wishes from Troy into the Greek camp, where Diomedes immediately makes an impassioned plea for her love. Blancheflore, a Christian captive in the hands of a pagan king, is sold into slavery to prevent her association with the prince and becomes the object of Floire's quest. What relationship do these fictional representations of displaced female power and desire bear to the women who may have been in the audience? The romance's overdetermined privileging and displacement of the female public invite further thought.

As we shall see, the displacement of women from agency in romance may take place at several levels. First, it may occur within the fictional frame, in Prologues and Epilogues, when the lady who has been set up as the source, inspiration, or patron loses her influence to the clerk's narrative authority. Second, it may happen within the course of the narrative, when