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

Roberta L. Krueger

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This book studies the relationship between Old French verse romance and the women who formed a part of its reading and listening audience. The author challenges the notion that courtly literature promoted the social welfare of the noblewomen to whom romances were dedicated or addressed. She shows how many romances effected a sophisticated mystification of medieval women's loss of autonomy in the family and society during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. At the same time, however, Krueger argues that many romances also portrayed the tensions inherent in courtly gender ideology in a way that invited the reader's critique or resistance.

Taking as its point of departure the problematic inscription of women as readers within selected individual romances and drawing upon feminist and reader-response theory as well as recent historical studies, Krueger provides close readings of well-known and lesser-known texts from Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* to Jakemes' *Le Roman du Castelain de Couci et de la dame de Fayel*. Romances studied include misogynistic or "uncourtly" romances, romances that idealize the heroine, didactic romances, as well as romances that cast the woman reader as an object of desire. A final chapter on Christine de Pizan studies one historical woman's response to romance in the late Middle Ages.

The representation of women readers in romance suggests that women's reception of gender ideology was conflicted. If some historical women were complicitous with courtly values, others may have questioned or even resisted traditional gender roles. The intriguing inscription of women as dedicatees, readers, listeners, and spectators catalyzed a critique of courtly ideology and opened a discursive space for the medieval audience's debate about gender issues as it continues to do for readers today.

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WOMEN READERS AND
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FRENCH VERSE
ROMANCE

ROBERTA L. KRUEGER

Hamilton College, Clinton, New York



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For Thomas and Maude

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It is fitting that a book about the question of audience should begin with a consideration of its own intended readers. I have written these pages with two groups of readers in mind. The book's primary audience consists of medievalists, especially critics of Old French romance, but also other scholars interested in twelfth- and thirteenth-century courtly culture. An important second audience is composed of feminist and cultural critics interested in the problems of gender and reading in earlier literature. If I hope to demonstrate to the former the vitality of feminist theory for medieval studies, I would like to convince the latter of the continued fascination of romance and of its important legacy in our contemporary ideology of gender.

This study explores the relationship between Old French courtly verse romances from about 1160 to 1300 and the women who formed a part of their audience. During this period, when the vernacular language, or "romanz," replaced Latin as the literary language of the courts, when secular narrative flourished, and when the nobility sought to distinguish itself through an ideology of courtliness, noblewomen became more directly associated with the emerging genre of romance than they had been with any previous literary genre. Women, or a woman, were acknowledged as the dedicatee or source of many romances. Romances appeared to feature women's interests and their sentimental conflicts more prominently than had the earlier and contemporaneous epic, or *chanson de geste*. Female characters in courtly narrative also played a more active role than the revered ladies of courtly lyric.

My study takes as its starting point the aristocratic *dame* who

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is addressed in the frame of many romances, in the Prologue or Epilogue, as a privileged audience. She is variously hailed as source, inspiration, patron, dedicatee, or beloved recipient. Within the fictions, female characters, distinguished by their beauty, grace, and intelligence, often feature prominently at the center of chivalric adventures. Such flattering dedications and fictional inscriptions have led some critics to infer that noblewomen exerted considerable influence in shaping romances, and that romance broadly promoted women's sentimental and social interests.

Yet, as I discuss in chapter 1, the ostensible privileging of noblewomen in courtly culture accompanies the displacement and appropriation of historical women's autonomy in twelfth- and thirteenth-century society. Verse romance flourished at a period when medieval educational, religious, and social institutions articulated strict gender divisions, and when didactic literature preached restrictive social roles for women, whose intellectual and sexual autonomy was subordinated to the rule of fathers and husbands. Insofar as the male clerics who wrote romances espoused the values of chivalric society, romances furthered the interests of the male aristocracy, often at women's expense.

An analysis of the narrative strategies of individual works reveals that the apparent privileging of noblewomen in the frame of the romance masks the displacement of the female reader's subjectivity. The female reader who projects herself into romance is often entrapped by her literary encounter. If she identifies with the feminine identity created by the text, she becomes an object of male desire or of exchange between men. The reader so enticed becomes complicitous with a scheme that works against her.

The female subject within romance is frequently objectified and appropriated by chivalric values. But it does not follow that the noblewomen who read or heard romances necessarily identified with their fictional counterparts or were willing accomplices in their textual appropriation. Nor does the paucity of women's fictional writing in the period between Marie de France and Christine de Pizan prove women's tacit assent to

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courtly ideology. As this book will demonstrate, the problematic women readers so often depicted in courtly fiction might be viewed as both inscribing and inviting historical women's possible resistance. If some authorial interventions solicit women's attention and consent, others seem calculated to evoke women's objections. Fictional representations of women as readers and spectators may also portray women who question courtly conventions. The following chapters will explore how the female reader *in* romance problematizes the role of the female reader *of* romance.

Taking its cue from the intriguing inscriptions of women readers in selected twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances, this book explores a range of questions confronting the female reader who projects herself into the narrative frame. Beginning with Chrétien de Troyes' *mise en question* of female reception in *Yvain* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* (chapter 2), I show how verse romances throughout the thirteenth century continued to inscribe women readers in ways that invite both complicity with conventional gender ideology and critical response. In chapter 3, I turn to look at romances that have been dubbed "uncourtly" – here represented by *Ipomedon*, *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, and *La Vengeance Raguidel* – to show how their antifeminist outbursts highlight gender tensions within the chivalric ideal. Chapter 4 examines the misogyny in Heldris de Cornuaille's *Le Roman de Silence* and reads it as symptomatic of male anxiety about the romance's devalorization of female nature.

Romances that idealize heroines for their sexual fidelity, as in the romances of the *cycle de la gageure* analyzed in chapter 5, may have fostered the reader's conformity with traditional gender roles. Yet we do not know that didactic texts always succeeded in perpetrating orthodox gender ideology. Some texts that attempted to indoctrinate men and women in the separate gender identities of medieval chivalric society, as is the case in the work of Robert de Blois analyzed in chapter 6, may, in fact, have conveyed a more complex and unstable picture of gender identities than is first apparent. In chapter 7, I examine the effacement of the woman reader's subjectivity in a romance written for a lady who is the object of the author's desire, *Le*

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Roman du Castelain de Couci et de la dame de Fayel. A final chapter on Christine de Pizan demonstrates how one historical female reader in the late Middle Ages dramatized the dangers and limitations for women of romance's masculine amorous discourse.

Romances of this period have long been hailed as reflecting in remarkable ways the social and political tensions of the feudal aristocracy. Critics have demonstrated convincingly how romance narratives explore the intersection of language, sexuality, and subjectivity. But scholars have neglected to consider that romance's self-reflectivity might have posed particular problems for women readers. By failing to consider how romance speaks or does not speak to women, much romance criticism overlooks one of the genre's central preoccupations: the problem of women's response.

Romance played an essentially conservative role in transmitting patriarchal ideology and class privilege. But the richly ambiguous texts examined in the following pages suggest that the genre also records and fosters critical resistance. Even as they espoused an ideology of courtliness that cast women as object, Old French courtly verse romances created a discursive space for debate about gender issues. The implied female public and the inscribed women readers of Old French verse romance are the fictional traces of voices in a dialogue whose words are lost. These fictional inscriptions may be viewed as the indirect precursors of the historical women who actively rewrote the masculine plot of desire: Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Madame de Lafayette, and their successors.

Most previous readings of romance have focussed on the male protagonists or on the narrating clerk as the fictions' central figures. This perspective was no doubt the dominant one within medieval clerical and aristocratic culture. But the romance audience also included readers whose identification with, and interpretation of, romance may have been quite different. The problematic figure of the woman reader in the frame of the story or within the narrative is often the catalyst for a resistant, critical interpretation of courtly ideology. I hope these pages will show that other readings of romance are possible, and that

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alternate and resistant responses are both registered within and fostered by the genre.

Although the romances of Chrétien de Troyes are well known, other romances in this study will be new to some readers. Fortunately, many scholars have recently devoted their efforts to translating Old French romances. When available, English translations are listed in the bibliography; for other works, French translations are cited. Some works remain untranslated, at least for the moment. The translations provided for passages cited in the following chapters are my own, unless otherwise noted.

This project results from several years of reading, thinking, teaching, and talking about medieval women's relationship to courtly romance. It began as a consideration of the female reader in Chrétien de Troyes, and has continued as an analysis of later romances in which women readers were explicitly inscribed or problematized. The essays on *Yvain* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, the section on *Ipomedon*, and the chapters on the wager romances and on Robert de Blois, have been previously published. I would like to extend my thanks to the appropriate editors for permission to reprint this material here in a revised form.

My greatest reward in working on this project has been the opportunity to engage in lively discussions with students and colleagues. A special debt is owed to several scholars who have been as forthcoming in their criticism of my work as they were generous in sharing their ideas: E. Jane Burns, Sarah Kay, and Simon Gaunt served on many occasions as "ideal" readers. Others who generously contributed their expertise and comments, either on individual chapters or on the work as a whole, include Peter Allen, Paul Barrette, Emmanuèle Baumgartner, Matilda Bruckner, Thelma Fenster, Sheila Fisher, Thomas Head, Sandra Hindman, Tony Hunt, Sylvia Huot, Janet Halley, Peggy McCracken, H. Marshall Leicester, Linda Lomperis, Nancy Regalado, Beth Robertson, Helen Solterer, and Sarah Stanbury. I have learned from their criticism even when I have not followed their thoughtful advice. Any errors are entirely my own.

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I am particularly grateful for the ongoing intellectual sustenance of colleagues at Hamilton College. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Peter Rabinowitz, Patricia Francis Cholakian, and Rouben Cholakian read portions of the manuscript, providing thoughtful suggestions and encouragement at just the right moments. Eline Stevens and the students of the 1991–92 Hamilton College Junior Year in France deserve special thanks for their cheerful support during the final stages of this book's preparation in Paris.

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