Backgrounds to Romance: "Courtly Love"

"Romance" originally referred not to a specific literary genre but to the *vernacular* French language which was called *romanz* (meaning that it was derived from the language spoken by the Romans, i.e. Latin). French and other languages derived from Latin, such as Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, are still referred to as "Romance Languages" today. In the 12th century, literature which was written down in the French vernacular was referred to as "romance" to distinguish it from "real" literature, which was invariably written in Latin. Gradually, the term "romance" began to refer not to *any* narrative written in the French vernacular, but to the specific *sort* of narrative literature that was most popular among the French-speaking court audiences of France and Anglo-Norman England: stories of the chivalric adventures of knights and their ladies, often set at the court of King Arthur…

The audience for these early vernacular narratives was largely made up of women--the queen, duchess or countess and the other ladies of her court. These women naturally tended to be interested in stories in which women played more central roles than was true in Germanic epics such as <u>Beowulf</u> (which centered almost exclusively on the exploits of male warriors). Because the vernacular language poet's livelihood depended upon pleasing his/her audience, the vernacular narratives written for these courts ("romances") tended to focus on other plot developments than the fighting and male-bonding emphasized in epic poetry. The narratives still concern the deeds of brave warriors, but the Middle English knight (unlike the Old English thane) is motivated by love for his lady. Accordingly, women play an increasingly important and active role.

Two women who had a particular influence on the development of romance were Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen first of France and then of England, and her daughter Marie, Countess of Champagne (in Eastern France). Eleanor brought to the English court her interest in poetry, music and the arts, all of which were cultivated at the court of Aquitaine where she grew up (her grandfather William was the first known troubadour poet). In the vernacular narratives that were written for and/or dedicated to Eleanor--early "romances"--we find an emphasis on the sort of love relationship that is depicted in troubadour poetry, commonly known as "courtly love" (*fin'amors* in Provençal, the language of troubadour poetry).

The "courtly love" relationship is modelled on the feudal relationship between a knight and his liege lord. The knight serves his courtly lady (*love service*) with the same obedience and loyalty which he owes to his liege lord. She is in complete control of the love relationship, while he owes her obedience and submission (a literary convention that did not correspond to actual practice!) The knight's love for the lady *inspires him to do great deeds*, in order to be worthy of her love or to win her favor. Thus "courtly love" was originally construed as an *ennobling force* whether or not it was consummated, and even whether or not the lady knew about the knight's love or loved him in return.

The "courtly love" relationship *typically was not between husband and wife*, not because the poets and the audience were inherently immoral, but because it was an idealized sort of relationship that could not exist within the context of "real life" medieval marriages. In the middle ages, marriages amongst the nobility were typically based on practical and dynastic concerns rather than on love. The idea that a marriage could be based on love (as in the "*Franklin's Tale*") was a radical notion. But the audience for romance was perfectly aware that these romances were *fictions*, not models for actual behavior. The adulterous aspect that bothers many 20th-century readers was somewhat beside the point, which was to explore the potential influence of love on human behavior.

Social historians such as Eric Köhler and Georges Duby have hypothesized that "courtly love" may have served a useful social purpose: providing a model of behavior for a class of unmarried young men that might otherwise have threatened social stability. Knights were typically younger brothers without land of their own (hence unable to support a wife) who became members of the household of the feudal lords whom they served. One reason why the lady in the courtly love relationship is typically older, married and of higher social status than the knight may be because she was modelled on the wife of the feudal lord, who might naturally become the focus of the young, unmarried knights' desire. Köhler and Duby posit that the literary model of the courtly love relationship may have been invented in part to provide these young men with a model for appropriate behavior, teaching them to sublimate their desires and to channel their energy into socially useful behavior (love service rather than wandering around the countryside, stealing or raping women like the knight in the "*Wife of Bath's*" tale).

The behavior of the knight and lady in love was drawn partly from troubadour poetry and partly from a set of literary conventions derived from the Latin poet Ovid, who described the "symptoms" of love as if it were a sickness. The "lovesick" knight became a conventional figure in medieval romance. Typical symptoms: sighing, turning pale, turning red, fever, inability to sleep, eat or drink. Romances often contained long interior monologues in which the lovers describe their feelings.

A Latin-language work from the late 12th-century, Andreas Capellanus's "*Art of Courtly Love*", has sometimes been taken as a serious treatise describing the "rules" of courtly love, supposedly written for Countess Marie of Champagne (daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the person to whom Chrétien de Troyes dedicates *The Knight of the Cart*, the romance in which the love of Lancelot for Guenevere is first introduced). It is now clear that the work is *not* a serious treatise but a *satire mocking the conventions of courtly love*, written within a university milieu hostile to the conventions of courtly literature. Nonetheless, the treatise attests to the popularity of the literary conventions of "*fin'amors*" within courtly society--for you can't satirize something that does not exist!