Medieval Love Through Centuries
from Far East to Far West
in *Romanesque*, by Tonino Benacquista

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According to Charles Seignobos: "Love is a French invention of the twelfth century." This statement could be the starting point of Tonino Benacquista's novel *Romanesque* (2016).[4] Writing about the unconditional love of a man and a woman from the twelfth century, the author offers the reader a double tale: the story of these lovers and its diffusion and reception in the modern days. While the author narrates the story of the lovers, they will tell, all along the twists and turns, their own stories in different manners and to multiple audiences, which in turn contribute to the broadcast. At the end of this process of re-appropriation and actualization, the original love affair becomes a true legend, which expands through the centuries and all around the world.

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[4] Tonino Benacquista, *Romanesque*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016. Tonino Benacquista is a French novelist and screenwriter of Italian origin, born in 1961. His work, including novels (e. g., *Saga*, 1997), detective stories (*La Commedia des ratés*, 1991), short stories (*Nos gloires secrètes*, 2013), screenplays for the cinema (*Sur mes lèvres*, co-written with Jacques Audiard, 2001) and comics (*Lucky Luke contre Pinkerton*, co-written with Daniel Pennac, drawing by Achdé, 2010), is characterized by a great variety and has met with both critical and public success. In addition, some of his novels and short stories have been adapted for the cinema, the most famous of which is *Malavita*, by Luc Besson (2013), starring Robert De Niro and Michelle Pfeiffer. To date, *Romanesque* is Benacquista's penultimate novel, followed by *Toutes les histoires d'amour ont été racontées, sauf une*. Paris: Gallimard, 2020. His latest publication is an autobiographical essay : *Porca miseria*. Paris: Gallimard, 2022.

This interlace structure of *Romanesque* between past and present leads us to focus on the construction of the novel and to explore the complex reuses of creation and transmission mechanisms of medieval writing. In order to analyze these mechanisms, we mobilize specific concepts of medieval studies, such as *mouvance*, *performance*, rewriting, actualization, and the notion of authoriality, especially through the figure of the storyteller and the author.

The re-employment of these specific notions from medieval literary studies unveils a metanarrative reflection on the act of creation revealing a critical and theoretical dimension. The novel, therefore, acquires an experimental aspect. This metanarrative effect also applies to the thematic of love, to the extent that the text questions the resonance of medieval love in our modern society. However, Benacquista's idea about love and its permanence from the twelfth to the twenty-first century goes even further. It addresses medievalism itself. In order to demonstrate how Benacquista's work innovates and renovates at the same time, we propose to examine, after a theoretical setting, first the gesture of creation and transmission, and then the conception of medieval literary love.

I. Theoretical Setting: Romanesque and Medievalism

Tonino Benacquista narrates a medieval love story between two French lovers. Their passion excludes them from their community and leads them to their death sentence. Nevertheless, their death becomes the trigger of the plot: after banishment from secular life, they suffer the same fate in Heaven. Because of the intensity of their passion, the lovers provoke the wrath of God who drives them out of Paradise and sends them back to Earth, at the antipodes of each other, as punishment. The man, a poacher, lands in Latin America, while the woman, a gleaner, awakens in Asia. Along with this geographical leap comes a temporal leap, as they are projected in the eighteenth century. Then begins a quest for their reunion, during which the lovers will tell their story. This story, transmitted by word of mouth, will move in space and time until it ends up in a preserved manuscript in Thailand, engraved in a *bas-relief* in Colombia, and adapted into an English play. This one – entitled *Les mariés malgré eux* [The unwilling bride and groom]– becomes the medium for transmitting this love story in the twenty-first century. Projected into the

twenty-first century, the lovers will experience other adventures. They will be sought by the authorities because of their anonymity.

The main subject of Benacquista's novel is the passion of this couple who travels through time and space. However, the title of the book does not emphasize these medieval lovers: the author chose the elusive title "*Romanesque*." This title, which at first glance seems simple, actually raises several questions: does it evoke a romantic story or does it refer to the novelistic genre? This indetermination echoes the difficulty to define the concept of "Romanesque," as Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out in his article simply entitled "Le Romanesque."[5] Schaeffer highlights the semantic plurality of the term. First, the word "romanesque" derives from "roman" (novel), which originally does not refer to a literary genre, but to writings in Romance language. The term "roman" has evolved over time, from a linguistic concept, to include fictions in verse and prose from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Then, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "roman" was interpreted as a literary genre – novel – and became more closely related with the meaning of "romance" referring to fictions whose importance is given to the realm of affects, passions, and feelings.[6] Therefore, the notion of "romanesque" can encompass literary, linguistic, generic, and thematic phenomena. Thus, in order to fully grasp the meaning of Benacquista's work, the title *Romanesque* must be understood in all its acceptances. In terms of literary genre, it is a fictional novel telling the romance of a couple from medieval France in the twelfth century – a geographical and temporal space that sees the blossoming of Romance language literature.

In addition, the text also witnesses the four traits of "romanesque" defined by Schaeffer. First, the action is essentially motivated by the characters' emotional life; as we said, the love story is the main theme of the text. Second, the "romanesque" fictional world offers a representation of actantial typologies extremely polarized, it becomes the theatre of all excesses, where superhuman actions, models of virtues, or even absolute vices come into play.[7] In short, the "romanesque" tradition shows the gap between the purity of the represented axiologies and real-life behaviour. In Benacquista's novel, this feature is highlighted by the

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[5] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "Le romanesque," *Vox Poetica* (2002): 1-14, www.vox-poetica.org/t/ articles/indexarticles.html (accessed September 27, 2020).
[6] Schaeffer, "Romanesque," 6.
[7] *Ibid.,* 8.

transgressive position of the couple, marginalized from the community due to the unconditionality of their love – a passion that conflicts with the daily life of the community, as the villagers' astonishment shows: "The villagers, all of whom had experienced famine, wondered about the incredible temperance of these two, as if they were gaining strength through hardship." [Les villageois, qui tous avaient connu la famine, s'interrogèrent sur l'incroyable tempérance de ces deux-là, comme s'ils gagnaient en force au fil des privations (p. 23)].

This opposition, between the couple and the villagers, refers to a third characteristic noted by Schaeffer: the "romanesque" mimetic particularity, which presents itself as a counter-model to reality.[8] In Benacquista's novel, this feature has a meta-diegetic value, because this reverse mirror of reality does not appear only between the characters of the novel and the reader, it is present within the diegesis itself. The author overlays in the fictional world the realistic universe of the community and the lovers' universe, disconnected from reality due to their absolute love. And it is essentially through the villagers' imagination that the gap between these two universes is created:

Imaginations left fallow by too much misery finally revealed themselves to be teeming with bitterly delicious fruits, so that in the hamlet men and women led a secret life full of phantasmagorias, unfulfilled desires and grandiose projects. And perhaps, through their ramblings, they were laying the foundations of a legend to come. Like a gap to be filled, a need to explore an obscure part of themselves, a collective concern to answer questions with allegories and to give anxieties picturesque springs.

[Les imaginations laissées en jachère par trop de misère se révélaient enfin foisonnantes de fruits délicieux comme amers, si bien que dans le hameau hommes et femmes menaient une vie secrète pleine de fantasmagories, de désirs inassouvis et de projets grandioses. Et peut-être posaient-ils là, à travers leurs divagations, les prémices d'une légende à venir. Comme un manque à combler, un besoin d'explorer une part obscure d'eux-mêmes, un souci collectif de

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[8] *Ibid.*, 11.

> répondre aux questionnements par des allégories et de
> donner aux inquiétudes des ressorts pittoresques. p. 24]

Therefore, the villagers' imagination excludes the couple from a historical Middle Ages to send them into a marvellous fictional universe, and they start to give birth to the legend.

Finally, the event-driven saturation of the diegesis and the extensibility of its outcome constitute the last feature of the "romanesque" concept. The twists and turns are the driving force behind the narrative rhythm and any ending can become a new starting point for a new adventure. Moreover, Jacques Roubaud agrees that the delayed ending is one of the characteristics of the novel, adding that all sorts of avoidance strategies are put in place to delay the end, making any ending a provisional one.[9] The diegetic extension and an open end are indeed present in Benacquista's work, which transgresses the finiteness of death in order to evolve the action over the centuries and even over the galaxies, as the couple is catapulted on another planet (p. 272).

By managing to embody the different meanings of the "romanesque" terminology and applying the features defined by Schaeffer, Benacquista's work appears like a construction putting a concept of literary theory into practice. Hence, the novel demonstrates a scholarly character and the mastery of narratological and critical tools, giving the text a special position that oscillates between fiction and theory. The author, therefore, acquires the double role of novelist and literary theorist or critic, offering a double level of reading of the text: narrative and meta-narrative. In addition to questioning the definition of "novel," the story also unveils a commentary on literary history and a reflection on the processes of creation and transmission of a legend. Consequently, fiction reveals a critical value, referring to the modern and postmodern conception of critical activity as suggested by Baudelaire, Wilde, or Barthes. They compare the artist's relationship to the world and the critic's relationship to the work of art. They only differ from each other in that they don't start from the same point of view: the artist's activity is concerned with impressions produced by nature, experiences of life

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[9] Jacques Roubaud, *Poésie, etcetera : ménage.* Paris : Éditions Stock, 1995, 245.

and of the world; the critic's activity is concerned with those generated by plays, novels or paintings.[10]

With this permeability of the boundaries between criticism and fiction, *Romanesque* appears as an original postmodern and experimental fiction. Nevertheless, in this apparent originality, the presence of the Middle Ages acquires its relevance. First, because weaving links with the medieval past demonstrate the upstream study of the author who interprets the model texts, explores their cultural environment and studies their poetic and stylistic specificity, which is comparable to the exercise of criticism. This work allows the author to question the relevance of medieval texts to their own aesthetic universe, with the aim of renewing contemporary poetic forms. Second, this invitation to reflect on the links between past and present in the process of creation, reading, and interpretation, leads to questioning our contemporaneity, a peculiarity that is found in the majority of texts that borrow from the Middle Ages.[11] According to Umberto Eco, the reason why, in order to understand our present, we interrogate the Middle Ages lies in the fact that this period represents "the root of all our contemporary 'hot' problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin."[12]

And then, if Benacquista's work initially seems innovative in presenting two levels of reading – narrative and meta-narrative –, in reality it reveals merely a reflection of medieval texts. These already offer a double reading, as Todorov testifies by analysing the *Quête du Saint Graal.* Moreover, the extensibility of the diegesis by a provisional end, which we have mentioned as a trait of the novel, is a strategy particularly present in the medieval novel, as Roubaud indicates about the interlace structure of the *Lancelot* in prose, appearing then as "the most post-post-modern of all."[13]

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[10] Yves Landerouin, *La Critique créative, une autre façon de commenter les œuvres.* Paris: Champion, 2016, 32.

[11] *Passé présent,* ed. Nathalie Koble and Mireille Séguy. Paris: Éditions rue d'Ulm, 2009, 9.

[12] Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. by William Weaver 61-73. San Diego: Hartcourt, 1986.

[13] Jacques Roubaud, *Poésie, etcetera : ménage*, 245. [Mais la plus grande « manière » de l'évitisme, la plus post-post-post-moderne de toutes, c'est le roman médiéval: les entrelacements du Lancelot en prose. Ce n'est pas seulement qu'il lutte contre la célèbre et bien injustement décriée linéarité par les embranchement forestiers (au sens propre comme au figuré) de sa narration, mais parce qu'il résout le problème de l'achèvement en

It becomes clear that Benacquista borrows from the Middle Ages for the purpose of a novelistic renewal. He renews forgotten processes whose aim is to create an illusion of originality. Through this act, a double objective is affirmed: innovation and renovation. Koble and Séguy explain that borrowing from the Middle Ages to create a contemporary work is therefore as much about remembering the works as about renewing the gesture that ensured their survival and the medieval reference emphasizes the persistence of a questioning of origin.[14] Benacquista goes even further, because, in addition to only renewing past creative processes, he also tells us how they have evolved.

II. From Telling to Tweeting

The novel is organized in two parts. The first one focuses on the medieval love story through the prism of the modern play. The text, therefore, alternates between the contemporary period – presenting the lovers as spectators of the play – and the medieval time, where the action of the play occurs. The second part relates to the quest for the reunion following each point of view and continuing to interlace the past with the present. By building these alternations in the plot, Benacquista renews with the interlacing method from *Lancelot* in prose. However, these back and forth from past to present enlarge the distance between the medieval time, which appears as bookish, and modernity, which presents real historical features.

In *Romanesque*, the Middle Ages represent what Le Goff calls the "medieval imagination," mixing legend and history.[15] The novel describes a feudal society governed by Louis the Virtuous (p. 16). This name is absent from history books, but it evokes the Middle Ages through the qualifier that accompanies the king's first name. It sounds medieval enough to transport the reader to this epoch. The author creates a reality effect, giving the story a character of vraisemblance. However, it quickly disappears when the reader follows the couple's adventures in Heaven. Paradoxically, this event reinforces the realism in the rest of the tale, since the eighteenth century in which the lovers are

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n'offrant jamais que des <u>fins provisoires.</u>] About the interlace structure: F. Lot, *Étude sur le Lancelot en prose*. Paris: Champion, 1918, 17.

[14] Koble and Séguy, *Passé présent*, 24.

[15] Jacques Le Goff, *L'Imaginaire médiéval*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991 [1985], 4-53.

projected is the one of Philippe d'Orléans (p. 82). The reason from the Enlightenment comes to justify this presence of historical reality which accentuates the rupture with this legendary tale of the lovers from the Dark Ages.

This rupture reflects two phenomena. On the one hand, contemporary medievalism and the modern construction of the Middle Ages. On the other hand, this legendary construction of the Middle Ages exposes a diegetic plurality in the novel: the legendary space and the reality. The Middle Ages, as well as Paradise, belong to the imagination, there constitute this "other time, the one of the tale, where anything can happen" (p. 14). So, when the lovers are projected in modernity, they enter reality, but, at the same time, they are detached from it, because, unlike the other characters, they keep their anonymity and their impression of intangibility. However, this gives the lovers a special character: they come from a legendary and original era. This relationship to the origin is accentuated by their banishment from Paradise, which reminds Adam and Eve. They would thus embody a tale of origins taking its roots in the European Middle Ages, and propagating the absolute value of love.

The propagation of this tale preserves the mechanisms of creation and transmission of medieval texts. By telling their story, the lovers bring back the vocality of medieval poetic as defined by Zumthor. The voice becomes the only possible mode of realization.[16] But, at the same time, a concordance and a mixture between oral and written traditions remain which provoke the *mouvance*, that Zumthor refers to this incessant vibration and fundamental instability of the text. The story of the lovers knows this mixing, because it enjoys both oral and written tradition.[17] Its first transmission takes place in the Kingdom of Siam, through the gleaner. Because of a language that she lacks, she puts her story in writing on mulberry paper, while her husband, in the New World, tells their story to the Huacanis. These two traditions are justified by the geographical situation: the written word in China, the land where the oldest paper was found, and the oral word within a Latin American tribe considered primitive. And the instability of the narrative emerges from this first oral transmission, because the story is simultaneously translated, the passage from French to the language of the tribe marks a translation.

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[16] Paul Zumthor, *La Lettre et la voix*. Paris: Seuil, 1987, 22.
[17] Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*. Paris: Seuil, 1972, 610.

The *mouvance* continues each time the story is told again. When the Frenchwoman works on a tea plantation, she enhances her story with more skilful turns and she is even helped to finish her sentences (p. 93). This story was then repeated by the workers. The Frenchman, also, tells "his version, unpublished and rich in extravagant details" (p. 97). Moreover, Benacquista's novel makes explicit the malleable characteristic, proposing a meta-narrative insertion on the formation of a legend:

> The Frenchwoman did not take offence in any way: if a legend was always inspired by real facts, the voice of men perpetuated it to make it a common good. If it was polished by the word, if its rough edges were erased, if it was embellished, it was to make it accessible to all cultures and to transmit it across borders and generations. Hers had a long road ahead of it before finding its final form.

> [La Française ne s'en offusqua en aucune manière : si une légende était toujours inspirée de faits réels, la voix des hommes la perpétuait pour en faire un bien commun. Si on la polissait par la parole, si on en gommait les aspérités, si on l'agrémentait de fioritures, c'était pour la rendre accessible à toutes les cultures et la transmettre par-delà les frontières et les générations. La sienne avait encore une longue route à parcourir avant de trouver sa forme définitive. p. 110-111]

This *mouvance* of the story is accompanied by the movement of the characters in space. During their peregrinations, the lovers' story serves as a bargaining chip. Thanks to their tale, the gleaner receives dogs from a couple to guide her, and the poacher gets the last place on a ship for successfully entertaining the captain. Also, the Frenchman and Alvaro, prisoners of the Huacanis, regain their freedom, and the Frenchwoman, like a Scheherazade, manages to escape from the seraglio from which she is held, as well as all the other women. The story thus covers the double poetic goal of being useful *(utilitas)* and pleasant (*delectatio*). Consequently, this saving feature also has an effect on the part of the audience. This is particularly noticeable when the rich merchant couple regains the passion of the first days after listening to the story of the Frenchwoman (p. 101). The tale serves as a romantic example, becoming a desire mediator in the

Girardian sense of the word,[18] and recalling in Dante's *Inferno* the passion of Paolo and Francesca which comes alive when they read the *Lancelot*.[19] In the same way that Galehaut was the book, the Frenchwoman is the tale.

By restoring the vocality and the *mouvance* of the tale, Benacquista rehabilitates the art of storytelling, which, according to Benjamin, has dissipated with modernity.[20] The German philosopher states that the experience transmitted from mouth to mouth is

> the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.[21]

The storyteller is a wise man who passes on experience and offers counsel, because he has been given the opportunity "to reach back to a whole lifetime."[22] His talent is to tell the story of his entire life; he is the man who "could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story." This figure of the storyteller can be represented through two archaic prototypes: the one who travels and sees the country – the merchant navigator – and the one who knows the stories and traditions of the land – the sedentary ploughman. And the Middle Ages, with their trade structure, allowed the interpenetration of these two prototypes setting "the actual extension of the realm of storytelling."[23]

These two archaic types are precisely present in *Romanesque*: the Frenchwoman and her journey through Asia between rice fields and tea plantations represents the ploughman, while the Frenchman coming from the New World embodies the navigator. This connection with the art of storytelling allows us to understand the importance of the couple's anonymity, but paradoxically, it gives them the identity of the storyteller. Moreover, their journey passes through highly symbolic places in the

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[18] René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Hachette, 2011, 12.

[19] Dante, *La Divine comédie*, trad. Pier-Angelo Fiorentina. Paris: Lidis, 1992, v. 119-138.

[20] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller", In ed. Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000* 361-378. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

[21] *Ibid.*, 362.

[22] *Ibid.*, 378.

[23] *Ibid.*, 363.

tradition of storytelling. We have stressed the link between the Frenchwoman and Scheherazade, the oriental figure of the storyteller. We have also said that the Frenchman begins his journey in an Amerindian tribe where oral tradition is central, specifying that before returning to Europe he passes through an African village, in which two characters are introduced: the sorcerer and the griot (p. 126). Also, the transit through these lands, which refer back to pre-modern societies, is necessary to rediscover the very essence of the storytelling. Especially because for Benjamin this art has become rare with modernity: first by the rise of the novel with the nineteenth century bourgeoisie and secondly by the progress of information. Benjamin argues that information is in touch with the most immediate reality and finds a greater audience than intelligence coming from afar.[24]

In *Romanesque*, despite the title, the novel is absent as a relay for the legend, except at a meta-narrative level by the book through which the reader discovers the story of the lovers. However, information is omnipresent when the action is set in the twenty-first century, where media and technology are over present. The couple, who is now on hunt, appears as robotic or even lobotomized, connected with earphones (p. 197), constantly glued to their screens, following the latest news about themselves on television. However, in this ultra-modern world where everybody knows about them, they no longer tell their story, they are mute:

> No sooner have they hugged each other than they faint from sleep in front of a lit screen where sometimes it is about them. On the coffee table, their computers and telephones vibrate, tinkle, lead an independent life. The #runninglovers, messages, articles and links fall in rain. The legend of the lovers is now written without them and in spite of them.

> [À peine enlacés ils se sont évanouis de sommeil devant un écran allumé où parfois il est question d'eux. Sur la table basse, leurs ordinateurs et leurs téléphones vibrent, tintent, mènent une vie autonome. Les *#runninglovers*, messages, articles et liens tombent en pluie. La légende des amants s'écrit désormais sans eux et malgré eux. p. 252]

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[24] *Ibid.*, 365.

They are mute from experience, which tends to illustrate Benjamin's thought that immediate information causes the loss of the storytelling. It would even seem that in *Romanesque* Benjamin's thought is prolonged, when an editorialist in the *Washington Post* denounces the threat of social networks on public opinion, states that information is supplanted by the *buzz* focusing on the news item:

> Today, all you have to do is connect to YouTube! And politicians, with their eyes glued to social networks, no longer need to communicate through the press; a raging tweet tapped from the ends of the earth reaches its target much faster. The information has just been murdered by the *buzz*, an invisible and invincible competitor who chooses here to focus on a small couple of illegal immigrants – French people!

> [Aujourd'hui il suffit de se connecter sur YouTube ! Et les politiques, l'œil rivé sur les réseaux sociaux, n'ont plus besoin de communiquer par voie de presse, un tweet rageur tapoté du bout du monde atteint bien plus vite sa cible. L'information vient d'être assassinée par le *buzz*, concurrent invisible et invincible qui choisit ici de s'arrêter sur un petit couple de clandestins – des Français ! p. 231]

Nevertheless, this criticism is made by a representative of the press, a field that caused the decline of storytelling according to Benjamin. Therefore, this criticism is to be considered from a distance. Actually, the presentation of social networks in *Romanesque*, which may appear as negative in a first time, opens up a reflection. The buzz around the lovers will in fact gives rise to a community, admittedly mostly virtual, but which brings together all strata of society, from the most erudite to the most popular, such as a specialist in conspiracy theory, the French consulate in Thailand, a doctoral student, a Parisian, and, above, all ordinary people:

> The media rumour, which is impossible to contain, is reaching record levels of popularity. And those who are passionate about it are anonymous, everyday people, tired of ordinary scoundrels, tired of anxiety-provoking current events, tired of the pernicious observation of their

neighbour's morals, tired of the apology of stupidity spread out on the screens.

[La rumeur médiatique, impossible à endiguer, atteint des records de popularité. Et ceux qui se passionnent sont des anonymes, des gens de tous les jours, lassés de la crapulerie ordinaire, lassés d'une actualité anxiogène, lassés de l'observation pernicieuse des mœurs du voisin, lassé de l'apologie de la stupidité étalée sur les écrans. p. 253]

The term rumour has its importance, it refers to orality and, as Gingras highlights, it precedes the novel.[25] And the adjective "media" invokes various types of distribution channels that could arise oral, written, and visual practices at the same time. This transmediality contributes to the *mouvance* of the story and its diffusion is handled by anonymous people. Consequently, modern technologies that translate collective and anonymous writing have a greater tendency to bring the 21st century closer to the Middle Ages than to create a distance from them.

Moreover, in *Romanesque*, the appearance of characters in the twenty-first century is accompanied by a return to the Middle Ages. If the Frenchwoman went through several functions during her Asian journey, in the twenty-first century she becomes a gleaner in her modern version while waiting for the end of the markets to pick up damaged goods (p. 239). The couple also dress up as troubadours or minstrels and perform at medieval festivals to earn a living. In a way, they become themselves again. This revival of the Middle Ages is successful because:

The Middle Ages inspired confidence, to the point of forgetting its cruelties and miseries in order to retain only its age-old truths, before men fell in love with their own words. In the end, they had experienced the Renaissance, as those of today hoped for their own.

[Le Moyen Âge inspirait confiance, au point d'en oublier ses cruautés et ses misères pour n'en retenir que ses vérités séculaires, avant que les hommes ne s'éprennent de leur

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[25] Francis Gingras, "La mauvaise langue et les lettres, statuts de la rumeur et de l'écrit à la naissance du roman (1150-1230)," *Protée* 32 (2004): 87-99.

propre parole. Au bout du compte, ils avaient connu la Renaissance, comme ceux d'aujourd'hui espéraient la leur. p. 240]

One of these age-old truths is precisely love, that the couple embodies. This is also the reason why the criticism of the *Washington Post* editorialist can be questioned. The lovers are much more than a "fait divers," they remind us what love would have been like long ago: altruism and self-sacrifice, i.e., charitable love (p. 227, 254). Hence, again, the importance of a return to a pre-modern era is justified. Although, before this perfect love invaded the social networks, it passed through the theatre in the eighteenth century.

III. A Legend on Stage

Among the various achievements of the legend of the rebellious couple within the diegesis, we will focus on the one that weaves the main link between the contemporary framework story and the retrospective narrative that intertwine throughout the novel, namely the play entitled *Les mariés malgré eux.* Attributed to the British playwright Charles Knight, who is said to have composed it in London in 1721, this "classic" (p. 13) is actually the result of an infinitely more complex process of elaboration.

In the novel, Charles Knight is a "talented but uninspired" (p. 176) playwright who desperately yearns for glory. He thinks he has the material for a masterpiece when his brother Lewis, a merchant navigator, reports from a trip to China the story he heard from a Frenchwoman – our heroine – working on a tea plantation. The unknown woman had in fact "revealed the intimate episodes of her existence," including her alleged "rebirth" (*id.*) following a capital execution. Charles Knight thus staged "the legend of the woman with her head cut off" (p. 165), but the playwright was not entirely satisfied with his work, and anticipated only short-term success for his play. He was therefore astonished when a complete stranger, present at a performance of *Les mariés malgré eux* in Gibraltar (from where he was planning to return to France), arrived in London and introduced himself as the protagonist of his play. The intriguing character seeks information about the source of this work, in which he recognizes his own story. At his insistence, Knight finally acknowledges that the argument of *Les mariés malgré eux* did not emerge of his own imagination as he claimed, and accepts the curious bargain he

is offered: in exchange for a crossing to China on his brother's ship, the Frenchman will help him rewrite the play by infusing it with "the power of reality and the resonance of experience" (p. 166). Knight accepts and the play, in this reworked form, enjoys a glorious posterity.

From the first oral utterance of the story to its literary implementation in the form of a dramatic work, the story of the accursed lovers is therefore subject, in the case of the theatrical creation by Charles Knight, to a particularly subtle process of transformation, which involves very different methods of elaboration. After the oral spread of the legend by the gleaner and then by the English navigator, the written fixation that follows is quite relative, insofar as the play will be the object of a rewriting and the *mouvance* of the text is perpetuated. It should also be noted that the rewriting is motivated by a situation of reception which – after the oral tale and the dramatic writing – calls for a third type of updating of the story: the living representation, in deed and in word. Indeed, once the poacher, witnessing a staging of the story of his own life, has overcome his initial reaction of dismay, this fortuitous spectator will become critical and will judge the play rather mediocre, not only in terms of style, tone, and interpretation, but also in terms of the very plot of the work, particularly as regards the "false" (p. 143) happy ending. It is therefore a double motivation that drives the Frenchman to go and find the person given as the author of the play: to find his wife (the only other individual likely to be at the source of the story) and to re-establish the conformity of certain represented facts with the reality of his life.

A. An Authors' Reworking

Another peculiarity of *Les mariés malgré eux* is that this piece is the only formatting of the legend resulting from the contribution – although not simultaneous – of the two protagonists, the wife and then the husband. Of the two, it is the male character who assumes the most active – or at least the most conscious – participation in the literary elaboration process, since he becomes the "accomplice in writing" (p. 181) of the playwright who has "appropriated his story" (p. 150). The two men join forces to give Knight's play the scope he had hoped for, and if the collaboration between "the guarantor of reality and the representative of form" (p. 176) is not always serene, it is certainly fruitful, judging by the success of the second version of *Les mariés malgré eux.*

Throughout the singular creative process that leads to the rewriting of the play, the husband assumes multiple roles: he is at the same time or successively character, spectator[26] (of the first version of the play), narrator (of his own story to Charles Knight) and co-author (of the second version of *Les mariés malgré eux*). However, this latter status will never earn him the slightest public recognition, Knight having scrupulously ensured that his encounter and his connivance with the Frenchman remain a secret "for the sole purpose of reserving the absolute authorship of the work to himself" (p. 212). In this respect, it is significant that, in the novel as a whole, among the various works taken from the legend of the rebellious lovers, the only one that is attributed to an author is from the 18th century, a period that saw the introduction of legislation protecting intellectual property.[27] In fact, while Charles Knight is presented "draped in his position as a writer" (*id.*), the Frenchman, as a man of the Middle Ages – a period that ignores copyright – attaches little importance to the signature of the work to which he intends to contribute, as the very terms of the pact he submits to the playwright show:

> In exchange for his service, for which he would receive no remuneration or demand any credit, he asked to be introduced to his brother captain so that he could go with him to the very place where he had met this inspired picker [...].

> [En échange de sa prestation, pour laquelle il ne percevrait aucune rétribution ni n'exigerait aucun crédit, il demandait à être présenté à son frère capitaine afin de partir avec lui sur le lieu même où il avait rencontré cette cueilleuse si inspirée [...]. p. 167]

Nevertheless, although he does not recognize himself as an *author*, our protagonist functions as an *authority*: he attests to the truthfulness of the story told in the play, helps to shape the legend about his couple, and

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[26] Or even a director when, at the end of the performance of the play he is attending, the young man "cannot refrain from [...] giving a few acting instructions" [« ne p[e]ut se retenir de [...] donner quelques indications de jeu », p. 144] to the comedians, inviting them to adopt a sober style of acting.

[27] For example, in France from 1793. See Bernard Edelman, *La propriété littéraire et artistique*. Paris: PUF, 2008 [1989], 34.

validates one version of it. And this, it seems, is what is essential in the eyes of the person who, from "co-author" (p. 176) becomes character once the new play is completed, while Knight is consistently referred to as the author:

> The author's farewells to his character were more moving than expected; their secret pact had created the same uneasiness in each of them, as if they had transgressed some sacred law of artistic genesis [...]. But this pact knew no precedent and would not be emulated, and no matter where the text originated, only the laughter and tears that it would arouse for centuries to come counted.

> [Les adieux de l'auteur à son personnage furent plus poignants que prévu ; leur pacte secret avait créé en chacun d'eux un même malaise, comme s'ils avaient transgressé quelque loi sacrée de la genèse artistique […]. Mais ce pacte-là ne connaissait aucun précédent et ne ferait aucun émule, et peu importait l'origine de ce texte, seuls comptaient les rires et les larmes qu'il allait susciter pour les siècles à venir. p. 182]

Higher than vain personal glory, the purpose of the anonymous lover is to entertain and edify future generations. His approach thus joins that of his beloved when, stranded in a small village in Thailand, she begins to write her memoirs. Not knowing the local language, but nevertheless feeling the need to tell her story, the wife leaves a small autobiographical volume in French to the village women who took her in, in the hope that one day someone would be able to decipher its contents and make her experience known: "Such was the vocation of this document: to record the truth of their story so that others might be inspired by it" [« [T]elle était la vocation de ce document : consigner la vérité de leur histoire pour que d'autres s'en inspirent », p. 80]. It is therefore a conscious and deliberate desire to pass on an experience that drives the French lovers: beyond their individual quest, they seek to make a mark, to touch the human community by recounting the story of their lives, which will be disseminated through multiple transmission channels. It means that, even if their story is put on paper, they conserve their anonymous identity as storytellers.

B. Theatrical Performance or Role Reversal

When, following a new leap in time, the French find themselves in the contemporary era, they are given the opportunity to see the result of the husband's collaboration with Charles Knight. Indeed, while the lovers are on the run across the United States, a performance of *Les mariés malgré eux* is announced in the city where they are stopping off. Despite the risk involved, the couple goes to the Chicago Theatre to attend.

If, from the point of view of the diegetic chronology, this episode takes place towards the end of the journey of the rebellious lovers, it corresponds, in Benacquista's narrative setting, to the novel's opening scene. From the outset, the theatrical performance, which the heroes attend as spectators, is shown as a pivotal moment when the boundaries – between fiction and reality, between past and present – become permeable: "Reality slowly vacillates towards another time, that of the tale, where anything can happen [...]" [« Le réel vacille lentement vers un autre temps, celui du conte, où tout peut advenir […] », p. 14]. It is significant that this fusion of worlds and this blending of temporalities takes place through stage representation: combining orality and textuality, the dramatic genre constitutes the privileged place of hybridity. Its dual written and oral component also places theatre at the crossroads of the practices through which the artistic elaboration of the legend of our heroes was forged. It is therefore easy to understand why those concerned are curious to see and listen to a synthesis of these practices,[28] and why they are tempted, during this suspended, timeless moment, to allow themselves a rare moment of passivity by delegating their roles to their performers. However, the respite will be of short duration.

By concretizing one of its infinite potential modalities of realization, the theatrical performance leads to a re-actualization of the work, thus perpetuating the *mouvance* and the creative process. In this case, this

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[28] All the more so as our medieval protagonists have been theatre-lovers ever since they had the opportunity, in their own time, to attend a performance by actors: "On their way home, they gave thanks to that handful of illuminated people who, in immemorial times, had invented theatre. [...] They promised themselves that they would not miss any of the next shows, and even if they had to walk all day long, it was a small price to pay for their delight" (« Sur le chemin du retour, ils rendirent grâce à cette poignée d'illuminés qui, en des temps immémoriaux, avaient inventé le théâtre. […] Ils se promirent de ne rien rater des prochains spectacles, quitte à marcher tout le jour durant, c'était bien peu cher payé pour le ravissement qu'ils en tiraient », p. 39-40).

renewal takes place both through the interpretation of the actors and through the public's participation, on which the creative potential will move. Indeed, during the performance, the outlaws are recognized among the spectators and soon have to flee from the forces of law and order, whose irruption disrupts the course of the performance: "Suddenly the stage becomes the hall and the hall becomes the stage when armed men emerge from the floor [...]" [« Soudain la scène devient la salle et la salle devient la scène quand du parterre surgissent des hommes armés [...] » p. 71]. It is then that the audience, moved by "the power of the tale" (p. 72), with the same enthusiasm, takes up the cause of the runaways, whom they symbolically identify with the heroes of the play, without being able to suspect that the two couples are actually one and the same:

> We then hear the whistles of the audience, silhouettes rise up here and there, as if this classic of the English repertoire was taking a turn that nobody wants; we have witnessed the sad destiny of the condemned, the hateful king, the gallows, the executioner, the people who exalt themselves with their death. Tonight they will be given a chance. And rare are the opportunities for spectators who have come to see a play to rewrite its ending.

> [On entend alors les sifflets du public, des silhouettes se dressent çà et là, comme si ce classique du répertoire anglais prenait un tour dont personne ne veut ; on a assisté à la triste destinée des condamnés, le roi haineux, le gibet, le bourreau, le peuple qui s'exalte de leur mise à mort. Ce soir on leur laissera une chance. Et rares sont les occasions pour des spectateurs venus assister à une pièce d'en réécrire la fin. p. 71-72]

Although it also concerns the actors in the play,[29] this reversal of roles and situations cannot fail to evoke in the medievalist reader of *Romanesque* a kind of illustration taken to the extreme of the notion of the "accomplice listener" [« auditeur complice »][30] that Paul Zumthor poses

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[29] "The two main actors, spectators in turn, applaud the runaways" [« Les deux acteurs principaux, spectateurs à leur tour, applaudissent les fuyards », p. 72].

[30] See Zumthor, *La Lettre,* 245-268.

in relation to the medieval work, of which the "listener-spectator" [« l'auditeur-spectateur »] would be "in some way a co-author" [« en quelque manière coauteur »].[31] Indeed, according to the scholar, "the performed work is […] a dialogue, even if, more often than not, only one of the participants *has* the floor" [« [l]'œuvre performée est […] dialogue, même si, le plus souvent, un seul des participants *a* la parole »].[32] This is indeed a collective and participatory creation, in which each contributor takes on different roles in turn.

The episode of the performance at the Chicago Theatre allows relaunching the adventure of our heroes, who, with the help of the audience, manage to escape from the police force and then go on the run again. But if this chosen audience functions as an adjuvant for the runaway couple, the same will not be true outside the privileged space of the theatre. The news of the escape of the outlaws spreads with the lightning speed of the modern media; certainly, the story of the mysterious couple most often arouses sympathy, but very quickly the popular enthusiasm is so overwhelming that it becomes detrimental to the heroes, who have all the trouble in the world to pass incognito:

> A long time ago, the lovers were careful to pass on their history. Today they would give everything so that their traces fade away as if by magic, in memories and in writing.

> [Bien loin est le temps où les amants veillaient à transmettre leur histoire. Aujourd'hui ils donneraient tout pour que leurs traces s'effacent comme par enchantement, dans les mémoires et dans les écrits. p. 91]

While the separated lovers have told and spread their story extensively in order to progress in their quest for each other, once reunited, they are overwhelmed by the extent of the media rumour about them, just as they were victims of the village rumour in their "first life." The community had, in fact, granted itself the right to take hold of their romance, making public what should have remained private, while the poacher and the gatherer aspired to nothing more than to live out their nascent love discreetly; thus they were led to their downfall. In contemporary times, the facts repeat themselves to some extent, as the passionate lovers find

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[31] *Ibid.*, 249.
[32] *Ibid.*, 248.

themselves dispossessed of their history by a vast network of strangers, as we have seen. The amplification and popular appropriation of their personal history will eventually take them away from life once again. But the two rebels have already braved the afterlife. And no doubt the legend will survive them.

IV. L'amour

A. Love and Romanesque

Does love define the novel as a genre? The answer to this question is not simple. It depends on when one is asking it. According to René Girard,[33] the modern novel begins with the *Don Quichotte* of Cervantes. In this case, the answer would be no, since Cervantes's novel is far from being a love story. Rabelais's novels, more drastically, seem to exclude love from their narratives: neither *Pantagruel*, nor *Gargantua* or the *Tiers Livre* contain a real love story. One could even suppose that Rabelais wrote these texts against this topic.

In fact, it is possible that both authors are reacting against the trend that dominated writings for at least four centuries: since the twelfth century, love and the novel seem inseparable. The history of literature considers this union as the essence of what makes the novel and sees in one the origin of the other. We observe, for example, that love as a theme is gaining in importance between the three "romans antiques": the *Roman de Thèbes*, the *Roman d'Eneas*, and the *Roman de Troie*. If the first one does not include any real love affair in its tale, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, who wrote his *Roman de Troie* around 1165, includes many couples in it. Even the *Roman d'Eneas* describes how love bounds Eneas, the hero, to Lavinia. Their feelings are described with many details that remembered the lyrics of the troubadours and what they called *fin'amor*.

Love, as a criterion, seems to be valid even when we look at ancient Greek production. In his Introduction to the translations he provided for the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade collection, Pierre Grimal uses it when he is describing the love affairs of his novels.[34] At one point, he even compares the relationship between two young Greek lovers to that of Tristan and Isolde:

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[33] René Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, *op. cit.*

[34] See *Romans grecs et latins*. trans. Pierre Grimal, Paris: Gallimard, 1958, xx.

> Callirhoé, proud and concealed, does she not know, more feminine than Isolde, how to write to her second husband, when she has found her Tristan, and in a few lines of an apparent naivety, to make him hear the right note of a tenderness that is not ennobled by her ardour for Chéréas?

> [Callirhoé, fière et dissimulée, ne sait-elle pas, plus féminine qu'Yseult, écrire à son second époux, alors qu'elle a retrouvé son Tristan, et, en quelques lignes d'une apparente naïveté, lui faire entendre la note juste d'une tendresse que n'anoblit pas l'ardeur de sa passion pour Chéréas ?]

For the purpose of his demonstration, Pierre Grimal commits a chronological error: on the one hand, he implicitly suggests that the Greek novel is the origin of its medieval version, but, on the other hand, he describes the antique love with the aid of a medieval and famous example, as if it could have influenced the antique author. In doing so, Pierre Grimal illustrates how easily some medieval model of love, culturally well known, could serve anachronically as examples to explain to a modern reader what was love at a different time.

In any case, it seems that love and the novel evolved together in the Middle Ages and that it would be difficult to find many examples where love did not play an important role.

Affects and Romanesque

We have already seen that Jean-Marie Schaeffer tried to define the romanesque using four criteria. The first gives great importance to affects, passions, et feelings. He adds that the feelings often appear in a very intense way. In saying that, he suggests that love, and more precisely, passion, defines what constitutes a romantic theme.

Giving to his text the title *Romanesque*, Tonino Benacquista ascribes it to novel as genre, but to a specific kind of novel which would be itself "romanesque," that is to say, a novel of a novel, given that "romanesque" and novel (in French), are very close. In both cases, love is central to the novel and the "romanesque."

The story of *Romanesque* will not contradict this statement: love irrigates it and appears from the very beginning until the end as a passion.

The structure of the text underlines the importance of this theme since the story opens with the meeting of the two protagonists:

> One day, a man on his way to the city to negotiate the fruit of his poaching ran into a woman venturing into the forest to fill her basket with berries (…). But suddenly, seeing the other's silhouette in the distance, their blood freezes, their footsteps waver. A vertigo that lasts less than a minute, the time for them to break with the world before, because never again will such an opportunity to get rid of the burdens of the mind arise.

> [Un jour, un homme qui se rendait à la ville pour négocier le fruit de son braconnage croisa une femme qui s'aventurait dans la forêt pour y remplir son panier de baies (…). Masi soudain, en apercevant au loin la silhouette de l'autre, leur sang se glace, leur pas vacille. Un vertige qui dure moins d'une minute, le temps pour eux de rompre avec le monde d'avant, car plus jamais pareille occasion de se débarrasser des fardeaux de l'esprit ne se représentera. p. 19-20]

Likewise, the story ends – or begins over again – in the Nothingness into which they have been thrown: the image of a heart that starts beating again indicates it. The heart is here not only the principle of life but the seat of feelings (p. 272).

Between these points, love gives form to the tale. In Benacquista's story, love is even twice "romanesque:" first, because it is involved in a novel which takes place, presumably, in the wake of those medieval novels which consider love as their main theme: *Tristan and Iseut*, the *Knight of the Cart* of Chrétien de Troyes, but also more recent texts such as the *Voir Dit* of Guillaume de Machaut or the allegorical *Book of the Heart*, written by René d'Anjou in the fifteenth century.

Yet love is also "romanesque" because of the nature of the feeling described. On the one hand, the lovers never have doubts about each other even when they suffer, and most of all because it is the only feeling in the text. Tonino Benacquista's novel is not devoid of feelings such as anger, envy, jealousy, or hate, but all these affects do not play a crucial role in *Romanesque*, as does love. And, above all, they do not interfere with its progress.

B. Love as Medievalism

Tonino Benacquista's novel is based on two principles: on the one hand, it tells a story of love which begins in the Middle Ages when a woman meets a man in the forest; on the other hand, this story does not end in the Middle Ages, but continues until the twenty-first century. This has two consequences: it strongly connects love and the Middle Ages, and it creates a link between love and Medievalism. We will consider these two aspects one after the other.

Love and the Middle Ages

The already mentioned quotation of Charles Seignobos makes a link between an epoch and a feeling. In fact, the twelfth century has usually been seen as a time of change on different levels. A cultural renewal is often said to take place at this time; economic transformations are observed, as well as a new kind of relationship between men and women. It is during this century, too, that literature in vernacular begins to be written, first in France, then in other European countries. However, something troubling appears in Seignobos's statement. It is said that love was invented in the twelfth century as if the feeling itself did not exist before. This strange idea has persisted until very recently, as Simon Gaunt pointed out:

> It has been a common place in medieval studies since the last century that courtly literature simultaneously "discovers" the individual, woman, and love.[35]

In other words, Charles Seignobos's assertion would lead us to think that human beings discovered a new feeling, that is, love, only in the twelfth century. It is presumed that it is less a question of feeling than a matter of how people describe and speak about love. If there is any invention at all, it should most likely be that of a new discourse of love than of love itself.

What is important for us is based on the fact that at a certain point in the twelfth century one talked about love in a very different way. Even if Tonino Benacquista does not try to recreate the twelfth century with all

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[35] Cf. Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 71.

its details and peculiarities, several clues lead us to this period. The Middle Ages he describes is mainly global and elusive: we have already seen that it is a time where Kings wore nicknames (Louis the Vertuous, p. 16); we discover that at this time people write on parchment with a quill pen; hunger, poverty, and misery are the rule (p. 17-19). The author even specifies, soon after the representation of *Les mariés malgré eux*, that the meeting of the lovers takes place "ten centuries earlier" (p. 14), i.e., during the eleventh century. Another allusion to this century is made later, at the end of the story (p. 233). All these clues suggest that the Middle Ages is very much connected with the first love story. The theme of love then is rooted in a time that critics refer to as the moment where new social relationships between people emerge, and where the *fin'amor*, this new discourse on love, is created, first in the poems of *troubadours*, then in novels.[36]

Love and Medievalism

The fact that love between the French lovers took place in the Middle Age is of the utmost importance to us. With the help of fiction, or "merveilleux," as it is called in medieval stories, love travels through time and reappears twice in the narrative: firstly, driven out of Paradise by God himself, the lovers resurface in 1721; then, guided by the Devil, they land in France in the twenty-first century, at the very place where they had met.

More than a simple theme, love is therefore the same feeling from the beginning to the end of the novel. Moreover, it is experienced by the same protagonists throughout the story. If time and space change in the meantime, the passion remains the same.

The consequences of such a scenario are that love is not only born in the eleventh century, but that it is the same feeling that we experiment today. Time is not the only dimension to prove that. Space confirms its permanence. Separated by thousands of miles on the globe, the lovers tell their story to different people and each time it is well received, even with empathy.

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[36] Among many references, one could read: Maurice Accarie, "Courtoisie, fine amor et amour courtois. La course à la marginalité dans la civilisation féodale," In ed. Maurice Accarie, Jean-Guy Gouttebroze et Eliane Kotler, *Marginalité et littérature. Hommage à Christine Martineau-Génieys*, 1-28. Nice: Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2001.

The example of the Frenchman is a good illustration of this aspect. Prisoner of a South American tribe, he tells his story which is translated by a Spanish man who is also a prisoner. The distance between the history of the Frenchman and the people who listen to him is threefold: it involves time, firstly, because the love affair is already a six hundred years old story; then, space separates the audience from what they are listening to, as it all began in France; eventually, because it has to be translated from one language to another, the distance is a question of culture too. Nevertheless, despite the changes that may result from the translation, the audience is moved by it.

Identically, the same reception occurs when lovers are in the twenty-first century. Internet, social networks are fascinated by their history and relay all incidents as soon as they occur. Eventually, love in *Romanesque* acquires a sort of universal dimension. And even if love is taken in the "mouvance" of its transmission, it remains unchanged from the beginning to the end of the novel. Linked to its medieval origin, it becomes somehow the essence of medievalism in this text: it is at the same time the subject of the novel, a feeling born in the Middle Ages and which dominates the story, and an affect that travels through space and times without difficulty and is perceived unanimously by all those who are aware of it.

C. Love Models

We have not yet attempted to define what kind of love or discourse on love was born in the twelfth century. The "medieval" love shared by the protagonists described above not only originated in the Middle Ages, but resembles different models or examples borrowed from literature. Then, in order to better understand what it is made of, we will try, on the one hand, to compare the feeling with that of literary models, and, on the other, with what is called "courtly love" since the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, it should be necessary to find out what is the specificity of the love described by Tonino Benacquista.

Intertextualities

Our goal here is not to find all the models hidden behind Tonino Benacquista's lovers. But it seems obvious that some famous examples may have influenced him in the writing of *Romanesque*.

First of all, the story seems to be constructed according to a scheme borrowed from certain medieval texts. Like *Romanesque*, these texts tell us a love story in a less usual way. In any of these examples, the love affair is not the conclusion of the story, but its beginning. Then, after a time of happiness, the lovers are separated from each other by chance or by a character who acts against them, and most of the story tells us how the lovers manage to find each other, which is the end of the novel. We find this pattern in what are the so-called "romans idylliques."[37]

Then, on both occasions, at the beginning and the end of the novel, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, written by Ovid, inspired a scene to Tonino Benacquista. Indeed, prisoners of the king of France, we find the lovers separated by a wall, like the young lovers:

> Huddled against the wall, the lovers talked to each other without hearing each other. Resigned to the idea of being locked up with the insane, their fellow inmates ended up falling asleep.

> [Blottis contre le mur qui les séparait, les amants se parlaient sans s'entendre. Résignés à l'idée d'être enfermés avec des aliénés, leurs codétenus finirent par s'endormir. p. 49]

If their destiny differs from that of the ancient lovers who commit suicide, the modern lovers are forced to flee their home to find a place, even a temporary one, where to live their love. But, in this case, the scene in prison is the only point where the two stories come together.

Yet, the most obvious example that might come to the mind of readers is that of Tristan and Isolde. Not only is their love one of the best-known examples among medieval stories, but their story shares more than one detail with that of the lovers in *Romanesque*. As for Tristan and Isolde, their love also forces them to flee the society in which they live, be it their small village, the France of the Middle Ages, or the modern society of the twenty-first century.

The forest is another detail that brings the two stories together. It is known that Tristan and Isolde found refuge in the Morois forest after fleeing the court of King Mark. There, they live a life very different from their own. They have to hunt for food, they only have water to drink and,

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[37] See, in particular, Mirrha Lot-Borodine, *Le roman idyllique au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Picard, 1913.

more importantly for the time, they never eat bread.[38] In fact, they live more like animals than human beings.

That is not the case for the modern lovers. At the beginning, the story tells us that she picks berries in the forest and that he is a poacher. Their activities bring them closer to the forest and it is in the forest that they think they will find a refuge when the devil sends them back on earth, ironically, at the very place where they first met. But the forest has changed a lot since the eleventh century and it can no longer provide them food and security, as it used to do in those days.

What all these models from the medieval literature teach us is not only that all of them play a role in this story, but that they are contemporaneous with the feeling that the lovers share and that was born at some point in the twelfth century. In fact, it is the literature of this century that sets up codes for love and a new discourse about love, creating a new way of talking about love that is still ours – at least in part – in the twenty-first century.

But what they also point out is that, like the Middle Ages itself, none of them is the perfect example of what we read in *Romanesque*. Many details are absent in the modern story: for example, the lovers are older than the heroes of the *romans idylliques* who, by the way, are usually of a nobler rank, sons or daughters of emperors or kings; the love potion of Tristan and Isolde has no place in *Romanesque* and, above all, the French lovers stubbornly refuse to die.

Critical Models

Amor est passio quaedam innata ex visione procedens.[39]

This definition of love written by André le Chapelain in the last quarter of the twelfth century could apply to our story, since it starts in the forest, when the lovers see each other for the first time. More generally, it is the way in which a large part of medieval lovers falls in love. Chrétien de Troyes, among other writers, will refine this episode by imagining that an arrow made in the image of a young woman's body

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[38] See Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, "Aliments symboliques et symbolique de la table dans les romans arthuriens (XIIᵉ-XIIIᵉ siècles)," *Annales ESC* 47 (1992): 561-594.

[39] Quoted by Jean-Yves Tilliette in "'Amor est passio quaedam innata ex visione procedens'. Amour et vision dans le Tractatus amoris d'André le Chapelain," *Micrologus* 6 ("La visione e lo sguardo nel Medio Evo/View and vision in the Middle Ages (II') (1998) 187-200.

enters the eye of her lover and hits his heart without causing injury.[40] Guillaume de Lorris, on the other hand, in his allegorical *Roman de la Rose*, will not imagine another scenario, both taking their inspiration from Ovid's *Art of Love*.[41]

In his own way, André le Chapelain theorizes what the troubadours had recently invented in their poems, this new discourse of love and its rituals. However, we will be more interested here in another theory, the one conceived of by Gaston Paris in 1883. For the first time, Gaston Paris was introducing a new terminology that he called "courtly love." It would be difficult to do without it today when talking about sentimental relationships in medieval literature. We would now like to compare love in *Romanesque* with courtly love as defined by Paris.

Commenting on Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the cart*, the French scholar draws three criteria from it: love is adulterous, it involves a woman who dominates her lover even socially, and, finally, the knight lover tries to attract the attention of his lady by accomplishing feats that will help to increase her feelings and the courage of the beloved.

During the twentieth century, others return to Paris's concept of courtly love. They tried to shed light on aspects neglected by Paris, such as the discursive dimension of the phenomenon, or the fact that medieval expressions already existed at the time, like *corteisie* or *fin'amor*, to designate these social and sentimental relationships; some of them have even tried to direct this new love towards a more spiritual, even religious horizon.[42] But everything they've developed comes from Paris's theory.

Neither adultery, nor social inequality can link *Romanesque* and courtly love. The triangular relationship that usually ties together the wife, her husband, and her lover (for example, Guenever, Arthur, and Lancelot), plays no role in the novel. The social level of the French protagonists is not unbalanced as it should be if their relationship would resemble that of courtly lovers. The woman never becomes the *lady* of her poach lover.

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[40] It is in *Cliges*, his second novel, that Chrétien de Troyes describes his heroine in this way.

[41] See Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose* ed. F. Lecoy. Paris: Champion, 1973.

[42] In the chronological order, we refer to : Rudiger Schnell, « L'amour courtois en tant que discours courtois sur l'amour », *Romania* 110 (1989) 72-126 and 331-363 ; Maurice Accarie, art. cit. and Jean Frappier, « Vues sur les conceptions courtoises dans les littératures d'oc et d'oïl au XIIᵉ siècle », *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 2 (1959), 135-156.

What's left is perhaps the dialectical dimension of courtly love, that is, the dynamism between "armes et amour."[43] Here again, equality is at stake, since the woman and the man must face dangers and challenges upon their return to France, which contradicts the courtly model.

It is therefore difficult to assert that love in *Romanesque* resembles courtly love as defined by Gaston Paris. On the other hand, no example from medieval literature seems to fit with the relationship shared by the French lovers. One detail, however, could explain why Tonino Benacquista decided to situate the beginning of his novel in the Middle ages.

Love and Transgression

We have seen that adultery is one of the three criteria for identifying courtly love. Adultery has a double function in this case: it means that love cannot take place in matrimony, and, most importantly, that the lover must overcome an obstacle in order to obtain his lady's favors. The result is that courtly love involves some kind of transgression. The story of Tristan and Isolde provides a very clear example of this aspect, as Claude Machabey-Besanceney[44] points out:

> This passionate, irrational, asocial love calls for wandering: it is wandering, and condemns the two lovers to be cut off from the social body, and more particularly Tristan to decay.

What the French lovers experience is very close to that. From the very beginning, they become the center of attention and their passion raises questions from the people of their village who wonder what kind of bond binds them together:

> The villagers, all of whom had already experienced famine, wondered about the incredible temperance of these two, as if they were gaining in strength through privation. On the other hand, was it humanly possible to live like prisoners, without having to serve time or jailers to coerce them? And

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[43] The translation does not render the original: love and weapons. This pair of terms is used to express the dialectic between love and the exploits accomplished by the knight-lover.

[44] See Claude Machabey-Besanceney, *Le « martyr d'amour » dans les romans en vers de la seconde moitié du douzième à la fin du treizième siècle*. Paris: Champion, 2012, p. 132 for the quotation.

why were they not subjected to the natural law that any activity practiced to excess, including the most amiable such as gallant company, conversation, loitering, necessarily engenders boredom?

[Les villageois, qui tous avaient connu la famine, s'interrogèrent sur l'incroyable tempérance de ces deux-là, comme s'ils gagnaient en force au fil des privations. Par ailleurs, était-il humainement possible de vivre comme des prisonniers, sans peine à purger ni geôliers pour contraindre ? Et pourquoi n'étaient-ils pas soumis à cette loi naturelle qui veut que toute activité pratiquée à l'excès, y compris les plus aimables, comme la compagnie galante, la conversation, la flânerie, engendrât nécessairement l'ennui ? p. 23]

The word prison transforms the lovers into some voluntary prisoners. It also makes them criminals. This becomes true when Louis le Vertueux throws them in jail, as he realized that they do not possess the powers he expected from them. He sentenced them to death. In the meantime, their behavior or their activities had already made them marginal.

Consequently, Tonino Benacquista proclaims that a kind of continuity links medieval and modern loves in terms of their transgressive aspect. We have also seen that love in *Romanesque* was more a passion than an everyday feeling. This in turn informs the "romanesque" theme present in the novel, which, as has already been said, needs a kind of excess in order to exist. Eventually, *Romanesque* is a novel of love, an unconditional and absolute love which begins in the Middle Ages and lasts until the twenty-first century, making this feeling the very essence of medievalism.

This leads us to a conclusion that may constitute at first sight some sort of paradox. We have observed that *Romanesque* is built on a powerful agent of transformation: the tale of the lovers is altered, rewritten, even translated from the moment they meet in the forest to the last tweet exchanged in the twenty-first century. At the same time, the love that the readers of *Romanesque* discover is also the result of a series of transformations with respect either to the literature of the time (that composed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries) or to the model that critics have drawn from the same literature in order to "create" what they

have called "courtly love." In either case, a gap separates the affect of the lovers and its models. One detail, however, remains unchanged: the transgressive dimension. We can conclude that medievalism must rely on a stable base, a fixed element, in order to be able to go through all the other transformations and adaptations involved in its process.

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