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Matters of Form
Experiments in Verse and Prose Romance

The earliest romances, written in a French that was thought of as "Roman" – the new Latin! – grew out of and responded to the many innovations in verse form, rhythm and rhyme (in both verse and prose), and style in earlier and contemporary Latin writings. At first imitating and further adapting French romances (in some cases, via German intermediaries), other western and central European vernaculars developed their own formal repertoires. The use of prose for storytelling is nowadays so normal that it requires some mental effort to imagine a time when audiences had different expectations, but when we travel back in time to the earliest medieval romances that leap of imagination is essential. For, except for a few languages (notably Welsh, Irish, and Old Norse) with well-established prose traditions that could absorb the new fashion for romance, medieval romance begins in verse. The first half of this chapter shows how that verse is often different from what we expect from poetry today, while its second explains why medieval prose, too, should surprise us.

Verse

A good place to start is with Chrétien de Troyes, the pioneer of Arthurian romance, who was active around the 1170s. A few lines from the prologue of his first romance, *Erec et Enide*, illustrate the quality of his contribution to the history of form:

> D'Erec, le fil Lac, est li contes
> que devant rois et devant contes
> depecier et corronpre suelent
> cil qui de conter vivre vuelent.
> Des or comencerai l'estoire

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qui toz jors mes iert an mimoire
tant con durra crestïantez;
de ce s'est Crestïens vantez.[1]

(Erec, son of King Lac, is the subject of this tale [*contes*], which those who seek to make a living by storytelling habitually mangle and corrupt before kings and before counts [*contes*]. Now I will commence the story which will be in memory for as long as Christianity [*crestïantez*] endures. That is what Chrétien [*Crestiens*] asserts.)

False modesty was not for Chrétien and, unusually, the importance he claims for his story is based not on it being a *true* story but on its artistic superiority. Chrétien's formal choices push these claims very effectively, for what he did was to perfect what was becoming the staple meter for fiction, history, and didactic matter in French: the octosyllabic couplet. Chrétien's lines invariably consist of eight syllables, or nine if the line is feminine (ending on an unstressed syllable). The octosyllabic rhyming couplet had a long history before Chrétien and that history highlights the important innovations that Chrétien and, before him, the poets of the *romans d'antiquité* brought to it. The form goes back to Latin, where classical iambic dimeter gradually evolved into octosyllabic verse with rhyme. The formal characteristics of that early Latin rhymed verse – a mid-line caesura (break) after the fourth syllable, loose rhyme, sense units running in strict parallel with couplets – were transferred to the vernacular.

A generation before Chrétien de Troyes, poets associated with the Angevin court of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine began the process of adapting the octosyllabic couplet from what was essentially a sung form to one that was suitable for long narrative. The earliest romances in French – the *Roman de Thèbes*, *Roman d'Enéas*, and Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* – are in this medium. Chrétien's business was to pick off the remaining eggshells of the older form. When you are writing long poems you need to avoid monotonous cadences, and Chrétien managed this by various means. He created a balance between masculine and feminine line endings that now seems "natural" but was in fact new. His verse flows because he frequently allowed the sense to spill over from one line to the next (enjambment). Moreover, contemporary audiences must have been struck by the richness of his rhymes. As the above-cited lines from *Erec* illustrate, his rhymes are often not just on the final stressed syllable but extend back to the syllable preceding it, as in *crestïantez*: *vantez*. In the octosyllabic romances that Chrétien knew, such *rimes riches* were still uncommon. Another feature that distinguishes the "high end" of romance composition in French (and English) is *rime équivoque*: when Chrétien rhymes *contes* ("story") with *contes* ("counts") in

his prologue to *Erec*, he is not inanely repeating the same word but playing on different words with the same sound and spelling. This was a kind of verbal miracle that connoisseurs prized even more than *rime riche*.

Form, in other words, was a battleground for cultural capital, and educated readers and writers were more sensitive to the implications of formal choices than we may be today. Philippe de Beaumanoir shows that kind of sensitivity in his prologue to his early-thirteenth-century romance *La Manekine*, when he apologizes for the quality of his rhyming:

> Et se je ne sai leonime,
> Merveiller ne s'en doit on mie,
> Car molt petit sai de clergie.[2]

> (And if I don't know leonine rhyme, this should not come as a surprise, because I don't have much *clergie* ["learning, education"].)

'Leonine' was the term for what we now call *rime riche*[3] and Philippe de Beaumanoir, a nobleman rather than a cleric, associated this with educated poets – though, of course, poets who make declaimers of this sort are never as artless as they say, and the romance actually opens with an impressive volley of *rimes riches* (*ditier*: *delitier*, *l'orront*: *porront*, ll. 1–4) and *rimes équivoques* (*s'en*: *sen*, ll. 9–10; *dire*: *d'ire*, ll. 13–14).

Chrétien's romances were hugely influential not only on later romances in French but also on those in other languages. How did poets in other languages adjust to the octosyllabic rhymed couplet? The first vernacular romances in German were based on French models. Superficially, they look like their French sources. They employ end rhyme and are in couplets, but they clearly show less interest in syllabic regularity. Their poets counted *beats*, not *syllables*. The verse form they had inherited was the alliterative line, which required four beats (stressed syllables) and no fixed number of unstressed syllables. The new wine of romance was initially poured into these old prosodic bottles, now corked with end rhyme rather than alliteration.

With regard to rhyme, the similarities between Old French and Middle High German romances are closer, but here too there are some fascinating differences. The fundamental principle of rhyme is that it combines similarity with difference. In the case of *rime équivoque*, where the rhyme words (as in *contes*: *contes*, *fin*: *fin*) are phonologically identical, it is the semantic distinction between homophones that safeguards this principle. However, the fondness for *rime équivoque* was an acquired taste, and Middle High German poets did not share it. Rhymes on identical syllables were avoided. Where they occur, they are usually justified by subtle differences in degrees of stress. The master of this art was Gottfried von Strassburg, who rings the

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accentual changes on otherwise identical syllables. Here, for instance, is Isolde, explaining Tristan's alias, "Tantris," to her mother. We have marked the relevant rhymes for stress, using the *accent aigu* (´) for primary stress and the *accent grave* (`) for secondary stress:

> Nu muoter, nu scheide
> dise namen Tántrìs
> in ein tan und in ein trís
> und sprich daz tris vür daz tán
> so sprichestu Trístàn;
> sprich daz tan vür daz trís
> so sprichest aber Tántrìs.[4]

> (Now, mother, divide this name Tantris, into a "tan" and a "tris," and then say the "tris" before the "tan" and you will say "Tristan"; but if you say the "Tan" before the "Tris," then, however, you will say "Tantris.")

With the exception of a few romances written in the four-line strophe named after Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Titurel* (c. 1220), which first used it, all of Middle High German romance is in short couplets.

In Middle English romances, the rhymed couplet was also a popular vehicle. A good example of the English variation on the octosyllabic couplet is the fourteenth-century *Ywain and Gawain*, based on Chrétien's *Yvain*.[5] Most lines are iambic and octosyllabic (e.g. "Almyghty God that made mankyn," l. 1), but before Chaucer and Gower came along what mattered was the number of beats. An unstressed syllable could thus readily be omitted or added. In short, this was a rough-and-ready meter, and because poets liked alliteration (e.g. "Over ál the wérld wént the wórde," l. 46) the soundscape of alliterative meter is never far away. As in Middle High German poetry, *rime équivoque* was not part of most English poets' repertoire. The single example we were able to find in *Ywain and Gawain* – "Than went Ywain to his yn / His men he fand redy thareyn" (ll. 565–6) – suggests accident rather than design. Again it is Chaucer and Gower, who were deeply influenced by French (and in Chaucer's case also Italian) models, who developed an English taste for *rime équivoque*.[6]

What really sets English romance apart, however, is the amazing variety of verse forms that poets adopted. Alongside the couplet, the most popular form for Middle English romance was the tail-line stanza (known at the time as *rime couée*). The basis for this characteristically English stanza form is a rhyming couplet followed by a shorter "tail-line," which rhymes not with the couplet lines but with other tail-lines in the same stanza. Middle English poets played numerous variations on this basic form.[7] The rhythmical shape which tail-rhyme romances eventually gravitated toward was a four-beat

couplet line plus a three-beat tail-line. This prosodic format is the one that Chaucer adopted in his parody of tail-rhyme romances, *Sir Thopas*, which begins:

> Listeth, lordes, in good entent,
> And I wol telle verrayment [truly]
> > Of myrthe and of solas.
> Of a knyght that was fayr and gent [elegant]
> In bataille and in tourneyment;
> > His name was sire Thopas.   (ll. 1–6)[8]

The strengths of the form (an energetic rhythm, a colloquial directness – note, for example, plain *entent* rather than posh *entente*) – and its weaknesses (mechanical rhymes; monotonously end-stopped verses) are well illustrated here.

Chaucer did not capture, however, the enormous variety of tail-rhyme stanzas. In one of the earliest English tail-rhyme romances, *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, the tail-line is shorter (two beats).[9] And while *Sir Thopas* and *Bevis* are in six-line stanzas, some (e.g. *Emaré* and *Otuel and Roland*) are in twelve-line stanzas, while others (*Sir Perceval of Gales*, *Sir Degrevant*) are in sixteen-liners, with triplets instead of couplets between the tail-lines. The variety reveals the absence of an established norm for romance composition in Middle English. Apart from couplets and tail-rhyme, there existed an impressive range of alternative meters and stanza forms.[10] Thus, we have English romances in cross-rhyme, either in four-line stanzas (*abab*: e.g. *Sowdon of Babylon*, *Apollonius of Tyre* fragment) or eight-line ones (*abababab*: e.g. *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*); we have a romance in six-line *aaabab* stanzas (*Octavian*, Southern Version) and one in eleven-line stanzas (*ababababcbc*: *Sir Tristrem*). There exist romances (or should we say epics?) in unrhymed alliterative long lines (e.g. *Wars of Alexander*, *Alliterative Morte Arthure*), romances in rhymed alliterative stanzas (*ababababcdddc*: e.g. *Awntyrs of Arthure*), and one unique romance in stanzas of alliterative long lines followed by rhyming lines.

That unique romance is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It tells a wonderful story with a surprise at the end, and playing with expectations is also the essence of its verse form. Each stanza begins in alliterative meter:

> This **K**yng lay at **C**amylot upon **C**ristmasse
> With mony **l**uflych **l**ord, **l**edes of the beste.   (ll. 37–8)[11]

> (This king was in Camelot at Christmas, with many a fine lord, men of the highest order.)

Unlike rhyme, where the sounds at the end matter, alliteration is essentially a rhyme on the beginning of stressed syllables. We have emboldened the

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alliterating sounds (always two in the first half-line and one in the second half) to illustrate this. Alliterative meter was popular in the poet's native region (Cheshire), but the original audience must have been very surprised when after the alliterative long lines they were treated to a bob, a one-beat verse (*On sille* in the example below), and a rhyming quatrain:

> For all was this fayre folk in her first age
> > On sille,
> The hapnest under heven,
> Kyng highest man of wille;
> Hit were now grete nye to neven
> So hardy a here on hille.   (ll. 55–9)

(For these beautiful people were in the flush of youth, in the hall. The most blessed under heaven, their king a man of the highest mettle. It'd be very difficult to name a braver band of warriors existing today.)

The bob thus transports us from one type of verse (alliterative) to another (rhymed and iambic). Because there is no set number of alliterative long lines before the rhymed bob-and-wheel, that transition always takes us by surprise, just as the story does. But the biggest formal surprise comes at the end: despite the unregulated number of lines per stanza, the poem resolves itself into an exquisitely controlled cyclical shape. The first alliterative long line is repeated in the last, at line 2525 (encoding the number of the pentangle) and there are 101 stanzas, just as in the other famous poem by the same poet, *Pearl*.[12]

Last but not least, we should mention the seven-line rhyme-royal stanzas (*ababbcc*), which Chaucer pioneered for narrative. Chaucer got the stanza form from Middle French lyrics of love complaint, and first used it himself in a lyric complaint ("The Complaint unto Pity"). In Chaucer's finest romance, *Troilus and Criseyde*,[13] that association of the stanza form with lyric complaint repeatedly comes to the fore. An example is Troilus's song in book 1, the earliest translation of a Petrarch sonnet in English:

> If no love is*, O God what fele I so?   *If this isn't love
> And if love is, what thing and which is he?
> If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?
> If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,
> When every torment and adversite
> That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke*   seem pleasant
> For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke.   (ll. 400–6)

Fifteenth-century poets so admired Chaucer's *Troilus* that many of them borrowed this stanza form for their own romances.

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Why there was so much metrical diversity in English and so little in other languages is an interesting question. Romances in most European languages know only couplets and one or two other, local forms. Thus, Dutch and German poets wrote in couplets. The *Titurel* stanza provided a few German poets with an alternative, but the rhyme scheme of that strophe, *aabb* (followed by another strophe rhyming *ccdd*) is really no different from the couplet form. French had assonance and monorhyme in *chansons de geste*, with lines of different length: octosyllabic (in some early fragments), decasyllabic, and alexandrines (twelve syllables), so-called because it was the meter of versions of the legend of Alexander from the late twelfth century onward. Spanish had the *mester de juglaría*, similar in meter to French *chanson de geste*, and the *mester de clerecía* in *cuaderna vía*, four-line monorhymed stanzas of fourteen-syllable lines. However, keeping monorhyme or assonance going for any length of time is almost impossible in English or any other Germanic language, so Middle English poets, like Dutch and German poets, used the same verse forms for epics as they did for romance. This blurred the boundary between epic and romance, and the consequences for generic classification are with us to this day. For instance, texts that in French would be instantly recognizable and considered as *chansons de geste* are known in English as "Charlemagne romances" and in Dutch as "karelromans." Languages that made no formal distinction between epics and romances have thus ended up with a category of romance that is much baggier than that in languages where the distinction is formally obvious. Even so, generic diversity did not entail formal diversity in Dutch and German, which simply made do with rhymed couplets. Middle English poets, by contrast, co-opted for *narrative* verse what seem to have been originally *lyric* forms. Thus, the *abab* stanza that we find in various Middle English romances goes back to hymns, the tail-rhyme stanza to the Latin sequence, and Chaucer's rhyme-royal stanza to the French *complainte*. Perhaps it was the absence of a prestigious and established lyric tradition in the English vernacular that made it easier for Middle English poets to blur yet another formal boundary: that of narrative and lyric.

While in the French romance tradition, lyric and narrative maintained distinct verse forms, their formal segregation made possible some exciting experimentation of a very different kind: the inclusion of lyrics in the course of the story. The earliest example of a romance with inset lyrics is Jean Renart's early-thirteenth-century *Guillaume de Dole*. The story itself, told in octosyllabic couplets, is enhanced by the inclusion of forty-six *chansons*, some by named *trouvères* (lyric poets working in northern French), others anonymous dance songs. There is no better description of the colorful effect achieved by lyric insertion than that offered by the poet

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in his prologue. His romance is like a cloth colored with rich and expensive dye; it is "une novele chose," entirely different from other works, "brodez, par lieus, de biaus vers" (embroidered here and there with fine stanzas, l. 14).[14] It will be read and sung forevermore because the poet has given not just provided narrative but also "chans et sons" (songs and melodies, l. 10), and these songs are so well matched to the narrative that you would think that the person who made the romance ("cil qui a fet le romans," l. 27) also composed the lyrics.

The success of Jean Renart's experiment can be measured by the many romances that followed his example by inserting lyrics into verse narratives, from Gerbert de Montreuil's *Roman de la Violette* (c. 1228) to Jean Froissart's late-fourteenth-century *Meliador*. In English, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* owes something to this form, for in *Troilus*, too, lyrical insets, such as Antigone's song, are made to resonate with the mood of characters in the story, and Chaucer's remark that the romance may be read or sung – "red . . . or elles songe" (5.1797; cf. 4.799, 5.1059) – recognizes, as did Jean Renart ("chanter et lire l'orront," l. 22), that the mixing of forms also made possible a mixing of performance styles.

Prose

Modern readers, used to seeing prose virtually everywhere, may consider it to be a nonform: a minimalist intervention that allows the free and transparent transmission of content. We may even subscribe to the idea that prose is a kind of everyday plain-speaking, lacking literary artifice or rhetorical pretensions, and therefore somehow more natural, truthful, and authentic than verse – which, as something contrived for special occasions or purposes, may seem showy, artificial, and therefore hollow – or, at the other extreme, highly subjective and personal, in contrast to prose's greater objectivity. This set of ideas we may call "the myth of prose," which has been worked up by prose writers over many centuries as a way of promoting their product in a competitive literary market; claims like this on prose's behalf are akin to advertising that a particular laundry powder washes cleaner than others, and are not to be taken at face value. When we actually study any written (or declaimed) prose from any period and in any language, we see that the form has, of course, specific expectations of pattern, style, and register. No less than verse, prose is a form that intimately shapes and is shaped by its material, audience, and context. And formal experimentation in medieval romance writing did not happen only in verse: the appearance of prose romances in French around 1200 was a startling, radical development with Europe-wide impact.

European vernacular prose romance begins as part of a larger turn in French writing to prose narrative around 1200 CE, which produced histories of France, Normandy, the Crusades, and ancient Rome, sermons, and Bible translations alongside romances.[15] Prose narrative seems to have become rapidly fashionable: the long, elaborate works that form the backbone of the Arthurian tradition – the *Lancelot-Grail* Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, the prose *Roman de Tristan*, *Guiron le Courtois*, and *Perlesvaus* – were all composed in the first half-century after 1200. The same period saw the start of a vogue for reworking verse texts into prose, with some verse romances being "prosified" (*dérimé*) multiple times. What was at stake in this early turn to prose? The answer is, necessarily, contextual, but we can draw a rough distinction between prose romances in the thirteenth century, when the form was new and experimental, and those in the fourteenth and, especially, fifteenth centuries, when prose narrative was considered normal usage.

Although the early prose romances in French do not have crusade settings – all are Arthurian – they resound with the renewal of the crusading movement which occurred after Salāh ad-Din reconquered the city and most of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187, capturing the relic of the Holy Cross. The politically and spiritually reformist tone of early French prose narratives pitches them as responses to these catastrophic losses, which were blamed on Christian moral and spiritual back-sliding and political deficiencies, particularly infighting and weak leadership. Writing in the international language that was French, the romancers addressed a wider and different audience from Latin, setting out new standards and a new vocation for European chivalry, calling upon the secular nobility to rise to the cosmic challenge posed by the Crusades, and according it a crucial role in cosmic history. The patrons of these early works were crusading families, whose home domains lay along the northern and eastern edges of the kingdom of France and adjoining parts of the empire. Robert de Boron, whose name is associated with perhaps the earliest prose romances, is thought to have written for one Gauthier of Montfaucon-Montbéliard in the western empire, who became regent of the Latin Kingdom of Cyprus (1205–10). Whether composed by Robert or prosified from his verse romances, *Joseph d'Arimathie* (also known as *Le Roman de l'estoire dou Graal*) and *Merlin* (both c. 1200–10) break new ground in the way that they weave together Arthurian and redemption history and prescribe a new spiritual and moral seriousness for chivalry and for romance. Bringing together for the first time the apocalyptic prophecies of Merlin with the personal and collective spiritual renewal promised by the Grail, these works would become the core of the great Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles and set the abiding themes of early prose romance.

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To a new chivalric vocation, a new literary form. The pioneers of prose narrative in French, whether history or romance, repudiated the literary and formal playfulness that characterized verse romances and proclaimed that prose permitted new levels and kinds of historical and spiritual truthfulness. In prologues and epilogues, translators and authors claim that they avoid the formal constraints of meter and rhyme by choosing to write "en romanz sanz rime" (in Romance without *rime* [indicating both modern "rhyme" and "rhythmical" as distinct from "metrical" verse]). Axiomatically, "nus contes rimés n'est verais" (no account in *rime* is true), because "rime se velt afeitier de moz conqueilliz hors de l'estoire" (*rime* wants to adorn itself with words amassed outside the source [i.e., with extraneous matter]).[16] According to such claims, prose ensures greater fidelity to the *estoire* (story/source/history), whether that is (allegedly) historical events or a (posited) authoritative, ancient text. Prose supposedly affords better access to the wisdom or moral content conveyed by the source and, in particular, to its spiritual value. With these assertions, prose narratives aim to discredit their verse competitors in the struggle for dominance in the literary marketplace.

In the early period, a willful stylistic impoverishment supports these value- and truth-claims, with simple syntax, a restricted, commonplace vocabulary, and high levels of repetition. (Modern translators often introduce a variety and color that misrepresents this – to modern taste – excessive "prosaics.") This passage from the *Haut Livre du Graal (Perlesvaus)* illustrates the style:

> Atant es vos le chevalier ou descent tres par mi la sale, et estoit vestus d'une robe vermeille et corte, et estoit chains d'une riche chainture d'or et avoit un riche fermail a son col ou molt avoit riches pieres, et avoit un capel d'or en son chief. Et tenoit une grant hache a .ii. mains. Li chevaliers estoit de tres grant biauté et de jovene aé. Lancelot le voit venir, si le garde molt volentiers, car il le vit molt apert.[17]

> (Now see the knight, where he descends into the very middle of the hall, and he was clothed in a short scarlet robe, and was belted with a rich golden belt and had a rich brooch at his neck where there were many rich stones, and he had a golden hat on his head. And he was holding a great axe with both hands. The knight was of great beauty and of young age. Lancelot sees him come, and looks at him most willingly, for he saw him to be most adept.)

The simple grammatical articulations and coordinations create a weighty and mysterious sense of consequence.[18] Stripped-down literary form contrasts with luxurious trappings, so that the text reconciles spiritual and materialistic ambitions (just as crusading could make secular fortunes as well as redeeming the soul). For early-thirteenth-century prose romance

writers, the form *en romanz sanz rime* allows "li contes" or "l'estoire" to unfurl its full moral, spiritual, historical, and social force. The purported rejection of formal frills, therefore, has great positive value.

Both the French prose romances themselves and the habit of prosification traveled widely, but which vernaculars were used, and how, depended on local conditions. Evidence that writing prose romances in French was a prestigious practice in other countries, and not one necessarily or primarily associated with the kingdom of France, is supplied by the late-thirteenth-century "Arthurian Compilation" of Rustichello of Pisa, in Franco-Italian (a regional variant now thought to be a written, rather than spoken, form of French). Scholars consider this to be an original work, though Rustichello asserts in his prologue that he copied it from a book in French provided to him by the future Edward I of England, an obvious authority on matters Arthurian, when on crusade (1270–74). At around the same time, Dante ring-fenced prestige in prose for French, limiting his own search for a properly Italian "illustrious vernacular" to verse:

> propter sui faciliorem ac delectabiliorem vulgaritatem quicquid redactum est sive inventum ad vulgare prosaycum, suum est: videlicet Biblia cum Troianorum Romanorumque gestibus compilata et Arturi regis ambages pulcerrime et quamplures alie ystorie ac doctrine.

> (because of the greater facility and pleasing quality of its vernacular style, everything that is recounted or invented in vernacular prose belongs to [French]: such as compilations from the Bible and the histories of Troy and Rome, and the beautiful tales of King Arthur, and many other works of history and doctrine.)[19]

Dante's comment dismisses from consideration the many translations of French narratives into Italian prose that were produced from the thirteenth century onwards by notaries, lawyers, and merchants in central and northern Italy: educated, multilingual writers, whose reputation as unlearned scribblers is preserved in the condescending modern designation of their productions as *volgarizzamenti* (popularizations).[20] Dante's preference for conducting his own groundbreaking efforts in vernacular verse reflects how verse writing had responded to prose's predations in the thirteenth century: by laying claim to a high ground of intellectual and courtly speculation and formal experimentation, exemplified by Jean Renart's *Guillaume de Dole* and by the internationally influential *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (c. 1225 and 1270).[21] Since prose romances rejected ornament, formal complexity, and playfulness, verse seized these as the preserve of intellectual and social elites.

Things were different where local vernaculars enjoyed the sponsorship of a strong, centralizing regime. Prose romances were copied in the distinctive

French of England that was the vernacular of the country's elites (see, for instance, the early-fourteenth-century Cambridge, University Library, MS Additional 7071, which contains the Vulgate *Estoire del saint Graal* and *Merlin* and the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*), although there seem to have been few original compositions; romance writers in Anglo-Norman, as in English, preferred verse. Prose romance in English really took off only with printing. In contrast, chivalric prose writings (including, but not only, romances) in local vernaculars were tools of the well-oiled royalist machines of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Castile and Aragon, and the reign of Hákon Hákonarson, king of Norway 1217–63, triggers an "avalanche"[22] of prose texts in Old Norse, including translations of French romances and *chansons de geste* alongside local sagas, hagiographies, and chronicles.

We have, then, a contrast in literary histories, and something of a puzzle: prose romance writing was embraced in some European vernaculars, but not in others Prose romances in French were read and copied internationally, adapting to very different local contexts. Vernacular prose romances were also widespread in southern Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, Wales, Ireland, and Norway–Iceland; but elsewhere in northern and central Europe, and in Sweden, verse was preferred until the fifteenth century (and even those areas that commonly used prose also wrote verse romances). Vernaculars where prose romances did not catch on did, nevertheless, employ prose for various practical or prestigious discursive functions: prose didactic, devotional, scientific, encyclopedic, and travel writings are all well represented. But, apart from what appear to be isolated experiments – for example, fragments of a Dutch prose *Lancelot* (c. 1300),[23] or the Middle High German *Prosa-Lancelot* (c. 1250) transmitted only in fragments until the fifteenth century – writers in some languages composed romances in verse, and translated French prose romances into verse. Thus, in Middle English, the prose romances of the Arthurian Vulgate Cycle were initially adapted from French into verse: into four-beat couplets (*Arthour and Merlin,* c. 1275), into alliterative meter (*Joseph of Arimathie*, c. 1350), and into *abababab* stanzas (*Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, c. 1400). The first adaptations into English prose come only in the middle of the fifteenth century, with the *Prose Merlin* (c. 1450) and Malory's *Morte Darthur* (c. 1460).

In spite of these varying times and rates of adoption, and in spite of the persistence of verse, prose unquestionably dominated European romance writing by the middle of the fifteenth century. Although it had lost its early strangeness and urgency, prose nevertheless still carried a distinctive freight. Its traditional truth-claims and aspirations evidently bestowed a luster of historicity and chivalric piety, whether in romanticized biographies (such as *Le livre des fais [de] Bouciquaut* [1409] or Antoine de la Sale's *Jean de*

Saintré [1460]) or in tales about an obviously legendary past, such as *Perceforest*, one of many examples of mid-fifteenth-century prose romances whose supposed authenticity is sustained not only by its prose form but also by the claim to rework an earlier product. These works also embody newly stringent devotional and moral tendencies.[24] The high courtly register of the *Istoire de la Chastelaine du Vergier et de Tristan le chevalier* (mid-fifteenth century) helps to establish its ideal of chaste and honorable love:

> "O," dist Tristan, "ma tres honoree dame et maistresse, je vous mercy de vostre gracieusse responce, pour laquelle je puis avoir grant esperance en vostre misericordieuse grace. Tres noble dame, vous plaise a savoir qu'y n'est riens plus impocible que mon cuer estre separé de vostre amour."[25]

> ("Oh," said Tristan, "my most honoured lady and mistress, I thank you for your gracious reply, by which I may have great expectation of your compassionate grace. Most noble lady, may it please you to know that nothing is more impossible than that my heart be separated from your love.")

Latinate polysyllabic vocabulary and complex syntax work to distinguish the text not only from the formal and stylistic plainness of early prose romances but also from its verse model, the early-thirteenth-century *Chatelaine de Vergy*, notorious for the moral ambiguities that it constructs around its lovers. Other styles were available: for example, *Baudouin de Flandre*, a midcentury prose romance version of a verse *chanson de geste* – for prosification over-wrote the formal distinctions between genres that were obvious in verse – is briskly eventful. In any case, fifteenth-century prose continued to present itself as less ornamental than verse, although now time and profit are the main justifications.[26] Thus, Jehan Wauquelin in 1448 determines to "retrenchier et sincoper les prolongacions et motz inutiles qui souvent sont mis et boutez en telles rimes" (remove and cut the tardy augmentations and useless words which are often put and stuffed into such *rimes*).[27] Although often untrue, this rhetorical boast of relative brevity outlines a different set of social aspirations and obligations for its audience than those implied by the earlier claim to greater transparency and truthfulness.

Conclusion

The triumph of prose would be made complete by printing: the "myth of prose" joined forces with the Gutenberg revolution to produce the domination that we know today: in the novel, the short story, and even the prose poem. We should beware of oversimplifying: verse romance writing never died out and some old verse favorites made it into print. Elite circles (notably,

the ducal court of Burgundy) continued to patronize manuscripts, and amidst the glut of prosifications of earlier verse romances we still find the odd instance of octosyllabic couplets, as in Pierre's Sala's modernization of *Yvain* (1520). Printing ensured, however, that the large-scale future of reading materials belonged to prose, and it clearly created a climate favorable to the preservation of earlier prose romances. Thus, the German *Prosa-Lancelot*, the Picard French *Perceforest*, and the Castilian *Amadís de Gaula* survive whole in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century copies, but only in fragments before then. The fact that Malory's *Morte Darthur* survives intact in manuscript (London, BL, Add. MS 59678, c. 1480), whereas, for instance, fourteenth-century manuscripts of the Dutch prose *Lancelot* were torn up to be used as binding waste, is a coincidence of historical circumstance. Malory was lucky enough to try his prose experiment at a time when printing made it the medium of choice. Were it not for Malory's timing and Caxton's decision to use the Winchester manuscript as the copy-text for his printed edition, Malory's experiment in prose might have been doomed to the same fate as the Dutch prose *Lancelot*.

Notes

1. *Erec et Enide*, ed. Roques, ll. 19–26.
2. Phillippe de Rémi, *Le Roman de la Manekine*, ed. and trans. Sargent-Baur, ll. 30–3. The translation is our own.
3. *Le Roman de la Manekine*, p. 99.
4. Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*, ed. Utzmann and Hoffman, ll. 10616–22.
5. Cited from the edition by Friedman and Harrington.
6. See Ad Putter, "Metre and Versification," in Ian Johnson (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 72–82.
7. See Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008).
8. *Sir Thopas* is cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, pp. 213–17.
9. *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, ed. Fellows.
10. See Ad Putter, "The Metres and Stanza Forms of Popular Romance," in Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (eds.), *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 111–31.
11. *The Works of the Gawain Poet*, ed. Putter and Stokes.
12. On the verse form of *Sir Gawain*, see Howell Chickering, "Stanzaic Closure and Linkage in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Chaucer Review*, 32 (1997), 1–31, and Ad Putter, "The Predictable and the Unpredictable: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Metres of Middle English Romance," in Liliana Sikorska and Marcin Krygier (eds.), *Evur happie & glorious, ffor I hafe at will grete riches* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 71–88.
13. Edited in the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, pp. 473–585.

14. Jean Renart, *Le Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*, ed. and trans. Dufournet and Lecoy.
15. Lars Boje Mortensen analyses the significance of the "prose turn" (25) in different literatures: "The Sudden Success of Prose: A Comparative View of Greek Latin, Old French and Old Norse," *Medieval Worlds*, 5 (2017), 3–45.
16. Quotations, respectively, from Brian Woledge and H. P. Clive, *Répertoire des plus anciens textes en prose française: depuis 842 jusqu'aux premières années du XIIIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), p. 27, and Robert W. Hanning, "Arthurian Evangelists: The Language of Truth in Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances," *Philological Quarterly*, 64 (1985), 347–65 (p. 352).
17. *Le Haut Livre du Graal (Perlesvaus)*, ed. Strubel, pp. 390–2. The punctuation is Strubel's.
18. For in-depth literary analysis of early prose style and its effects, see Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
19. Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Botterill.
20. For a recent reassessment with wide relevance for prose romance, see Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
21. On verse's response to prose, see Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay, *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the "Rose" to the Rhétoriqueurs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Ardis Butterfield shows how Chaucer's writings fit into this verse tradition: "Chaucer's French Inheritance," in Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 20–35.
22. Mortensen, "Sudden Success," p. 35.
23. Orlanda S. H. Lie, *The Middle Dutch Prose Lancelot* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1987).
24. Rosalind Brown-Grant, *French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
25. *L'Istoire de la Chastelaine du Vergier et de Tristan le chevalier*, ed. Stuip, p. 86.
26. Richard Trachsler, "From Verse to Prose, a Matter of Size? Length and Lacunae in French mises en prose," in Leah Tether and Keith Busby (eds.), *Rewriting Medieval French Literature: Studies in Honour of Jane H. M. Taylor* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 181–92.
27. Jehan Wauquelin, *La belle Hélène de Constantinople (1448)*, ed. de Crécy, p. 14.

Further Reading

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