

This “Courtly Love” Thing

Truths, Half-Truths, and Misconceptions



We are talking about an age

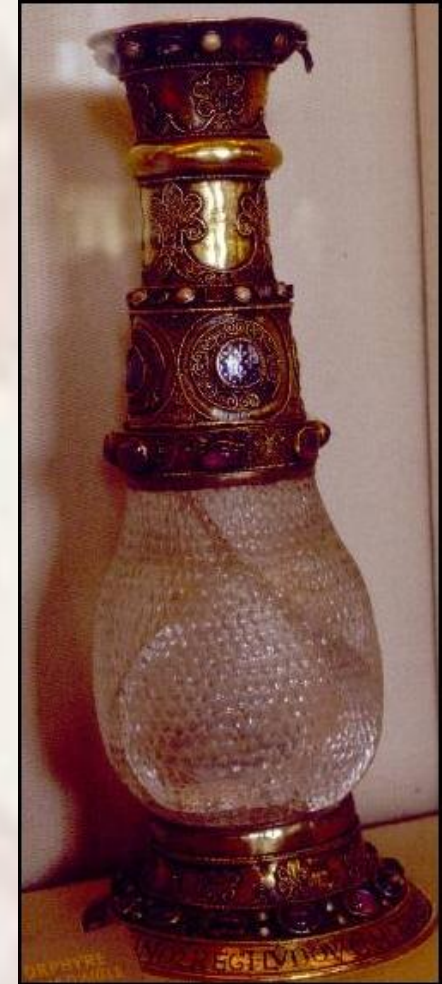
- That did not have paternity testing (or chastity belts!)
- That was organized around primogeniture determining inheritance rights
- That was governed by a church that taught that adultery was a mortal sin that would send the sinner to hell for eternity
- Where women were both powerful and powerless
- And where marriage (especially among the aristocracy) was often much more of an economic and political arrangement than an emotional union

We are also talking about an age

- Where the political and economic circumstances of great aristocratic families required moving from estate to estate to spread the economic impact and to administer the family holdings; husbands and wives sometimes had separate households (even to the point of separate bookkeeping)
- Where wars and crusades separated families for long periods of time
- Where young aristocratic men had to be socialized into “polite” society—no longer the ethos of the warrior band

Troubadour Poetry

- Troubadours are lyric poets employing the Romance vernacular called Provençal or Occitan.
- Muslim influence (many as prisoners in court of William VIII of Poitiers)
- William IX of Poitier (1071-1126) is the first recognized troubadour poet
- Eleven of William's songs survive



The Golden Age

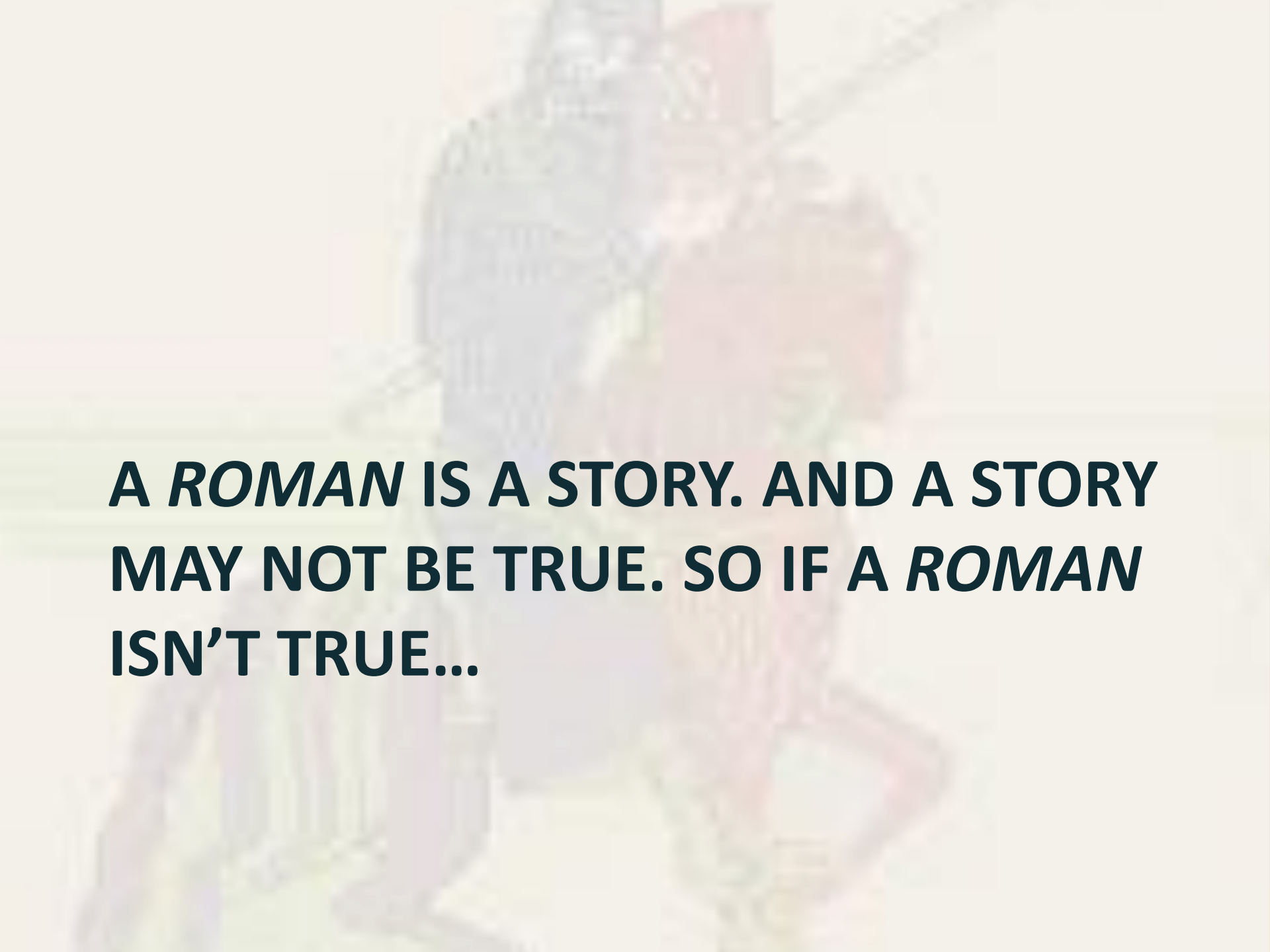


- Of more than 2500 surviving troubadour poems, more than half are from 1180-1220
- The troubadour tradition seems to have begun in western Poitou and Gascony, from there spreading over into eastern Aquitaine, Champagne, and Provence.
- Many poems are debates in which each voice defends a position on a topic relating to love or ethics—drawn from university teaching practices

Guess who's back...

- Eleanor of Aquitaine is the granddaughter of William IX.
- In 1168, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II separated; she took up residence in her ancestral lands of Poitou.
- Eleanor's court drew vassals paying homage, squires training to be knights, young ladies acquiring their education, and a circle of musicians, philosophers, artists, and literati
- “Fin’amor” comes from her court, as does the popularization of *romans* (histories or stories of famous people or places)



A faded background image showing a Roman soldier in a red tunic and a woman in a purple dress. The soldier is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They appear to be in a historical setting, possibly a marketplace or a public square. The image is semi-transparent, allowing the text to be clearly visible over it.

***A ROMAN IS A STORY. AND A STORY
MAY NOT BE TRUE. SO IF A ROMAN
ISN'T TRUE...***

...why isn't it a bad thing?

- Medieval distinction between “matter” and “meaning” (in Chrétien’s terms, between “matière” and “sen”) is crucial
- The matter of a *roman* doesn’t need to be true if it illustrates an appropriately moral meaning
- Based on kind of dialectic starting to become popular in university theology debates

Any evidence?

- No historical records offer evidence of its being acted out in reality. Historian John Benton found no documentary evidence in law codes, court cases, chronicles, or other historical documents.
- Courtly love probably found expression in the real world in social practices such as the crowning of Queens of Love and Beauty at tournaments.

IN OTHER WORDS....

IT'S A LIVE ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME



Sociology of the Game

- Used language of feudalism: poets declare themselves the vassal of the lady and addressing her as *midons* (my lord).
- The troubadour's model of the ideal lady was the wife of his employer or lord, a lady of higher status, usually the rich and powerful female head of the castle.
- The poet gave voice to the aspirations of the courtier class, for only those who were noble could engage in courtly love.
- Nobility not based on wealth and family history, but on character and actions, thus appealing to poorer knights who saw an avenue for advancement.

How Far Did It Go?

- All courtly love was erotic to some degree, and not purely platonic—the troubadours speak of the physical beauty of their ladies and the feelings and desires the ladies rouse in them.
- Unclear what a lover should do: live a life of pure love, channeling his energies to higher ends, or seek physical consummation.
- Again, legal evidence suggests it wasn't widely acted upon.

Andreas Capellanus

- From Troyes or thereabouts by dialect
- Flourished in late 1180s
- May have been a chaplain to Marie's court
- Known for *Liber de arte honeste amandi et reprobatione inhonesti amoris* (c. 1185) in 3 books
 - Bk 1: What Love is, what it does, how to get it
 - Bk. 2: How to keep Love, sustain it, and lose it
 - Bk. 3: Don't practice anything in bks. 1 & 2; show God you can withstand the temptation

Debate over how to read *De arte*

- Ironic view of the conventions of courtly love, written from an educated milieu outside the conventions of courtly literature (think *The Onion*)
- Treatise attests to the popularity of the literary conventions of "*fin'amors*" within courtly society—you can't mock something that does not exist!

What is “pure love”?

- Andreas Capellanus: *Pure love binds together the hearts of two lovers with every feeling of delight. This kind consists in the contemplation of the mind and the affection of the heart; it goes as far as the kiss and the embrace and the modest contact with the nude lover, omitting the final solace, for that is not permitted for those who wish to love purely.... That is called mixed love, which gets its effect from every delight of the flesh and culminates in the final act of Venus.*

And the adultery?

- The "courtly love" relationship *typically was not between husband and wife*, not because the poets and the audience were inherently immoral, but because it was an idealized sort of relationship that could not exist within the context of "real life" medieval marriages.
- The audience for romance was perfectly aware that these romances were *fables*, not models for actual behavior. The adulterous aspect that bothers many modern readers was somewhat beside the point, which was to explore the potential influence of love on human behavior and social relations.
- Again, this suggests that it was a social role-playing game.

Why did society need fin'amor?

- Fin'amor may have provided a model of behavior for unmarried young men who might otherwise have threatened social stability.
- Younger brothers without land of their own (hence unable to support a wife) became members of the household of the feudal lords whom they served.
- The lady in the courtly love relationship is typically older, married and of higher social status than the knight ; modelled on the wife of the feudal lord, who might naturally become the focus of the young, unmarried knights' desire.
- The literary model of courtly love provides these young men with a model for appropriate behavior, teaching them to sublimate their desires and to channel their energy into socially useful and morally improving behavior

Stages of Refined Love

- Attraction to the lady, usually via eyes/glance
- Worship of the lady from afar
- Declaration of passionate devotion
- Virtuous rejection by the lady
- Renewed wooing with oaths of virtue and eternal fealty
- Moans of approaching death from unsatisfied desire (and other physical manifestations of lovesickness)
- Heroic deeds of valor which win the lady's heart
- Consummation of the secret love
- Endless adventures and subterfuges avoiding detection

Courts of Love

- Andreas Capellanus describes tribunals staffed by 10 to 70 women who would hear a debate or “case” (*tenso*) about love & rule on it based on the rules of love. Motif shows up in art.
- 19th century historians took these courts as fact, but no evidence suggests they ever existed outside literature.
- According to Diane Bornstein, they may have been literary salons or social gatherings, where people read poems, debated questions of love, and played word games of flirtation.



Literary Theory of fin'amor



- In the middle ages, the term used was *amour fine* (in Occitan, *fin'amor*), pure love or refined love
- In the late 18th and early 19th c, scholars called it "*amour chevaleresque.*"
- In the late 19th c, the scholar Gaston Paris coined the term "courtly love" in an article on *The Knight of the Cart*

What characterizes *amour chevaleresque*?

- The term *amour chevaleresque* centers emotion on the male lover-hero, a lover who is also a knight.
- He fights, at least in part, because inspired by love, and is loved, at least in part, because of his successes as a knight.
- Individual emotion expresses itself primarily in action, which, although placed at the service of the lady, also serves the interests of community since the hero's opponents merit their defeat.



Amour Courtois

- The term *amour courtois* highlights instead the virtues of decorum and discretion in love.
 - It helps direct our attention to the ways in which love is regulated by principles of exchange in the same way as other feudal and courtly institutions.
 - The lover is involved in a complex way with his community, since the court helps to define his status and identity, and he in turn contributes to its welfare by his heroic actions. Individual emotion is framed by social pressure and communal interest.
 - Fictional love stories are ‘moral’ in the sense that they instruct the community on proper behavior & social responsibilities.

Fin'amor

Places the emphasis much more firmly on the individual behavior of the lover, on his or her moral conduct and personal inspiration.





When the
streams
cross...



Fin'amor & Arthurian Lit



Why such a good fit?

- Lots of knights whose adventures can be debated
- Most unattainable lady (Guenevere)
- Reputation for feats of arms, moral excellence



Why does the genre take off between 1100-1300?

- the refinement and expansion of court life in a period of relative peace
- the rise of the vernacular as a literary language
- the emergence of a class of educated clerics, often employed by aristocrats
- the presence of noblewomen as well as knights among the court audience, and
- the nobility's desire to define their social superiority

Earliest Arthurian Romances

- Beroul, *Tristan*, mid twelfth century
- Thomas of Britain, *Tristran*, c. 1155
(incomplete but survives in an extended form
in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, c. 1210)
- Welsh *Mabinogion* (c. 1060-1200)

Chrétien de Troyes

- Career from mid twelfth century (1160s? to early 1190s
- Associated with the courts of Marie de Champagne and Phillip of Flanders
- Possibly (by dialect) from northeastern France
- Highly educated—university background
- Some theories make him a Jewish conversus but probably not

Works

- *Erec et Enide* (c. 1160s or early 1170s)
- *Cligès* (c. 1175)
- *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (c. 1179),
completed by Godefroi de Leigni
- *Yvain* (c. 1184)
- *Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal* (unfinished,
begun by 1190) with multiple continuations

In the case of “The Knight of the Cart”

- Countess Marie gives Chrétien the *matière* and the *sen*; he is then tasked to illustrate it in such a way that will entertain, instruct, and move the audience
- His *matière* is “a story in which a lover fails—even briefly—to keep a vow to the beloved”, and the *sen* asks “What lessons can we learn about keeping promises from this story? What are the moral virtues reinforced by chivalry?”

Chrétien focuses on competing instincts

- The lover has made a vow always to serve his lady (integrity, loyalty, constancy)
- He hesitates (for two steps) because he fears losing his worldly reputation (worship, renown, fame)
- He must atone for his failure to keep his vow by serving ladies and demonstrating his worthiness without breaking promises made to his lady

He must undertake a quest to rescue her and re-prove his worthiness

- Series of increasingly difficult challenges, both physically and intellectually/spiritually/emotionally
- Lover often stops to articulate his thinking process—instructional for audience
- By rescuing maidens, freeing prisoners, etc., he not only demonstrates his prowess and worth but also makes community better—and other knights wish to emulate his deeds (ripple effect)