

The Ascendance of Love in *Aye d'Avignon*

A particularly puzzling aspect of the problem of genre differentiation in medieval literature arises when we encounter a text that exhibits features of both epic and romance. It is a problem we have inherited from the positivistic tradition of generic criticism where a genre category was defined by the characteristics of a standard text to which all others were compared, and when an organic perspective dominated the theory of genre development: A genre was born spontaneously, evolved into its highest form, then deteriorated and died. At the end of the twelfth century and beginning of the thirteenth, poems with the *laisse* form of *chansons de geste* generally tend to present material that does not entirely meet traditional expectations for epic subject matter or theme and thus have suffered from the bias against deviation from the standard inherent in this tradition.

One solution to the problem created by these unconventional *chansons de geste* is to forge a separate genre category for them. Critics have arrived at various designations such as "roman épique"¹ and "chanson d'aventures"² to describe the hybrid nature of the poems. Rather than end the discussion, however, this solution tends to focus attention on the question of unity. It seems that the quest for unity, the search for a simple yet comprehensive mental model to account for a complex set of facts, is an intellectual activity for all literary critics. To judge a work as an integrated whole has been a traditional statement of its artistic worth. Although we admit that a text does not have to fit securely into one single genre tradition for it to be unified, we expect that assigning a text to a genre category, hybrid or otherwise, will make that text more intelligible.

One poem associated with both epic and romance is *Aye d'Avignon*. Dated about 1200 by S.J. Borg,³ *Aye d'Avignon* ostensibly belongs to the feudal cycle of the *chanson de geste* tradition. Briefly summarized, the action of the story is dominated by antagonism between feudal enemies. Their moral status is clearly differentiated as the hero is opposed by the family of the vilest traitor of the Old French tradition, Ganelon, but this conflict between good and evil is not resolved in the expected way. Three-quarters of the way through the poem, the epic hero is killed in battle against Ganelon's nephew. This

untenable situation is resolved by the actions of a romance hero who, motivated by love for the epic hero's widow, saves the day and restores order to the feudal community. The romance hero, an exotic Saracen king, fulfills his private love quest while he fills the public need for a savior. The anomaly of a Saracen romance hero resolving the epic conflict creates tension between the genres on two levels. On the level of surface structure or *récit*, there is the question of plot unity: How do the romance quest and the epic conflict pattern join together to form a unified narrative structure? On the level of deep structure or ideology, the paradox is even more basic: Since the romance hero is a Saracen, his function as a savior should be impossible in a universe where "Christians are right and pagans are wrong."

Aye d'Avignon seems typical of the hybrid which calls into question the traditional genre approach to medieval epic and romance. Exploring the possibility of defining a new category, we will look more closely at *Aye's* place within the existing traditions in order to shed light on both the particular meaning of genre in the text and the general significance of genre distinctions. Recent contributions to genre theory by structuralist methodology provide the basis for our approach, which reveals how the relationship between two genres in *Aye d'Avignon* generates a transformation of epic moral values crucial to understanding the poem.

First let us turn to the question of unity. Plot unity depends primarily on the role of the woman, the eponym *Aye d'Avignon*. As the prize at stake in both the epic conflict and the romance quest, *Aye* is the common denominator of the plot. At the most basic level, she motivates the action since the heroes and their enemies act in response to their desire to possess her. Her unifying function, then, as an object of desire is mainly passive. In the epic community she is valued for being Charlemagne's niece and an orphaned heiress, whereas in the Saracen world, wealth and family connections cede to beauty as the determining factor of value. We can observe how the woman plays a unifying role in an instance where the epic hero and the romance hero join forces to prevent others from taking possession of *Aye*, despite their own conflicting desires to possess her. Their alliance in defense of *Aye* is analogous to the coherence of the plot as a whole. An epic renegade, Ganelon's son, sees *Aye* as a daughter of Eve:

Par fame vint en terre le premerains pechiez,
Qui menja de la pomme par le dit l'aversion,
Dont encor est li siecles penez e travailleiez.
(vv. 1152-54)

Moreover, when he takes her prisoner, "voirement la vot metre en son lit a bandon" (v. 1231). He becomes the ally of a Saracen renegade, Marsile's son, who also thinks of Aye as an evil agent of destruction. Like "Elainne la bele que Menelaus perdi" (v. 1677) who caused the destruction of Troy, Aye is expected to bring about the ruin of Charlemagne. Together, these conceptions of the female object form a negative image of woman which must be repudiated. The union of the two heroes, who share a positive image of Aye's worth, lasts long enough to ensure the annihilation of those who see Aye as evil.

Both heroes also marry Aye d'Avignon. It is her marriage to the epic hero that causes the conflict in the first place, and her marriage to the romance hero after his conversion that marks the resolution of that conflict. Although marriage functions differently in the epic and romance plots, its symmetrical presentation creates thematic unity and reinforces coherence of the work as a whole.

The rôle of the woman and the related marriage theme are the major unifying forces in the poem, but another level of coherence exists in the repetitive narrative pattern formed by the epic conflict. With one exception, each insult to the epic hero results in armed revenge. Twice the epic hero, Garnier de Nanteuil, defeats conventional epic renegades. In his first confrontation, he functions as an agent of divine punishment in a trial by combat. He defeats an enemy who essentially damns himself by blasphemously boasting that Garnier could not be protected from him even by God. Garnier's second challenger likewise employs a scheme that is doomed to failure. As we have noted, he follows in his father Ganelon's footsteps and chooses the son of Marsile as his Saracen ally. Garnier's victories against these enemies demonstrate the epic hero's rôle in the service of God within the Christian community.

Garnier also faces a third attack, this time from a rival whom he cannot overcome. Milon, the nephew of Ganelon, operates in a strictly secular world. His characterization breaks out of the conventional traitor mold. He uses

bribery to gain Charlemagne's favor and cleverly manipulates others involved in his schemes. Milon prefers to hire assassins rather than rely on his own physical prowess in battle against Garnier. He watches while his paid henchmen deal Garnier his mortal wound. Garnier's death creates a heroic void; it is an insult awaiting revenge, an interruption in the epic narrative pattern which is later completed when Garnier's son Gui avenges his father's death.

Gui does not act alone. As the new epic hero responsible for carrying out the revenge project against Milon, Gui is closely associated with the romance hero, the Saracen king Ganor. Gui's association with Ganor comes about through the only avenged insult to the epic hero in the poem. After falling in love with Aye, Ganor travels to Avignon where, disguised as a Christian pilgrim, he kidnaps Garnier's and Aye's son, Gui. Garnier ignores this affront; he is absent from Avignon, being engaged in a campaign to build up his defensive fortifications in Nanteuil. Ganor abducts Gui by ship to his kingdom and raises him lovingly at his court, thus successfully forging a bond with his beloved Aye. The Saracen patiently bides his time, his love for Aye never diminishing as a motivating force. Once Garnier is killed, Ganor finally has a chance to perform love service. Together with Gui, who has grown to love Ganor and has promised to give his mother to him in marriage, Ganor brings his Saracen army to Aye's succor in support for Gui's revenge project. Once Milon is killed and Ganor converts to Christianity, he attains the object of his quest and marries Aye d'Avignon. The act of revenge which completes the epic conflict pattern is also prerequisite to the fulfillment of the bride quest. Simply stated, the romance hero finishes what the epic hero started, so that the actions of both form a coherent narrative pattern.

From this brief outline of the epic plot, there arises the question, is Ganor truly a romance hero when a bride quest certainly belongs to the *chanson de geste* tradition?⁴ Although love is the dominant value of the romance universe, the answer to this question does not lie exclusively in Ganor's love for Aye, described in no uncertain terms:

Moult parama dame Aye Ganor li Arrabis,
Que depuis icelle hore qu'il primes la vit
Ne la pot oublier qu'il ne l'en souvenist,
En dormant, en veillant que il ne la veist.
(vv. 3480-3484)

As important as his love for Aye is his isolation from both the Christian and the Saracen communities. Excluded from the Christian group on the basis of his religion, and separated from the Saracen group by the symbolic geography of his island kingdom, Ganor is an outsider. When the events of the story bring Aye to his kingdom, he is transformed from an exotic secondary figure in the epic conflict into a hero in his own right. The story of his love is told from his point of view: We accompany him to Avignon where he commits the abduction of Gui. Ganor is not an aggressive Saracen warrior attacking a Christian stronghold. He kidnaps Gui through enchantment, not force, in keeping with a romance tone. To use Charles Altman's terms, his is a single focus rather than a dual focus narrative⁵ because we see the opposition between Saracen and Christian not from one side or another but from the perspective of someone outside who chooses between the two. As a hero in a romance plot, Ganor moves in a direct linear pattern toward his goal, and the choices he makes along the way are ultimately determined by love.

Single focus narrative also involves a certain attitude toward time. The moral progress of the romance hero coincides with the development of the plot. Unlike epic action which is produced from an inevitable confrontation between good and evil men whose moral status remains more or less constant throughout, romance action proceeds from the demands of love on an individual who, though already good at the start, becomes better as he faces and surmounts obstacles. In other words, the actions of a romance hero bear witness to his moral development over time. In this moral scheme, love functions to make the moral ideal more accessible. Because it is a universal human emotion, we can identify with someone who is motivated by love even if he is an exemplar of moral perfection. In *Aye d'Avignon* Ganor's love quest benefits the community despite his position as an outsider, and he thus performs the moral function of a romance hero.

To summarize the discussion up to this point, in terms of plot unity the romance and epic strands are woven together into a double braid although each remains clearly distinguishable. In addition to the unifying function of Aye, Ganor's bride quest is connected to the insult-revenge pattern through Gui, who has a stake both in avenging his father's death and marrying his mother to Ganor. But plot unity is just the first step toward clarifying the

relationship between epic and romance in the poem. A structuralist perspective directs our attention to the underlying system of values and beliefs that are expressed through the specific ordering of episodes in the text. Implied in the development of plot is a logical development of meaning. We must now ask how an epic value system based on the opposition between good Christians and evil Saracens can include the thematics of love as well as a Saracen romance hero.

The values predominant in chansons de geste reflect the ideological nature of the genre. The moral function of the epic hero is to lead the forces of good to victory over the forces of evil, the categories of good and evil being predetermined by the prevailing ideology of the French Christian community. The epic universe is therefore dominated by conflict between enemy groups arranged in binary opposition on the basis of religion or family association. In contrast to the romance hero who faces the world alone, the epic hero is subordinate to the community which he represents. H. R. Jauss puts it succinctly: "L'action épique du héros reste subordonnée à la destinée plus vaste de la communauté Chrétienne et nationale."⁶ When we identify with the epic hero in his battles against the enemy, we accept the values of the community as they are embodied in him. Unlike romance where the moral meaning is produced through the unique sequence of events in the narrative,⁷ in chansons de geste moral values are known in advance so that the outcome of the narrative is ultimately assured. With prior knowledge of who wins, narrative interest focuses on the process of attaining victory, a process which sometimes depends of the love of a Saracen for a Christian.

In spite of the "disjonction exclusive"⁸ between the two religious groups that finds expression in omnipresent war, there is some movement from one camp to the other. Even in the *Chanson de Roland* we find evidence of this shift as Queen Bramimonde converts to Christianity. Critics have recently pointed up the thematic significance of her conversion,⁹ and Zumthor also includes a "zone d'échange" in his diagram of "agents" in chansons de geste.¹⁰ Although Bramimonde's conversion is not motivated by love for a Christian hero, most other Saracen princesses who change communities do so in response to their emotions. In a semiotic interpretation of *La Prise d'Orange*. Van Nuffel concludes that Orable's "passion amoureuse" functions effectively to neutralize the opposition between Christian and Saracen and thus permits

the woman in love to abjure her religion.¹¹ However, Van Nuffel is quick to qualify this process of neutralization; her act is still considered as treason by the rest of her community so that the "disjonction exclusive des deux sociétés de religion" remains dominant in the poem's value structure.

In his "Deep Structures in the chansons de geste: Hypotheses for a Taxonomy"¹² Larry Crist proposes that Van Nuffel's schéma for Saracen princesses be incorporated into a more general model which accounts for all shifts from one pole of opposition to the other. From this wider perspective we can now look at Ganor as a structural equivalent to an "enamoured" Saracen princess, his love for Aye echoing Orable's for Guillaume. This functional definition of Ganor accounts for his introduction of love into the poem, but this love is not part of a new romance ideology. On the contrary, a Saracen's love for a Christian is an accepted epic convention when that Saracen is a woman because love remains secondary to the militant struggle between pagan and Christian. The desire of a Saracen princess to become Christian stems from an emotional attachment to a Christian hero on a personal level, not from a general acknowledgment that Christianity is superior. In *Aye d'Avignon*, however, as a result of the fact that a man plays the rôle conventionally played by a woman, love assumes a dominant position in the value system of the poem.

We can see the power of love in the final revenge episode where the conventional view of Saracens proves to be invalid. The Christian renegade Milon interprets the presence of Ganor's Saracen forces in Avignon according to the formula that Saracens are evil. He assumes that he has found a kindred spirit, just as his cousin and his uncle Ganelon did, and plans to join the invaders in an attack on the city. Milon fails to recognize Ganor as an exception, and his error of judgement underscores the change in the value structure of the poem. Ganor is not an enemy invader despite his Saracen religion. Love for Aye has transformed his moral identity, and the epic ideology of Christian supremacy is amended to account for this fact. Although Ganor's conversion eventually confirms Christian spiritual dominance, here the impact of love is clear: It is not possible to assume, as Milon does, that religion alone determines a predictable pattern of evil action for all Saracen invaders.

The ascendancy of love over religion is accomplished through a variation in the conventional shift from Saracen to Christian identified as part of the structure of chansons de geste. By changing the sex of the Saracen lover from female to male, love is valorized as part of the conversion process. This interpretation of the meaning of the sex switch depends, of course, on the assumption that in the underlying binary opposition between male and female," the male pole is valorized. The dominance of male over female, evident not only in the material conditions of Western society but also in the structure of Western thought,¹⁴ explains how a Saracen can be the agent of ideological change, bringing love to a new place in the hierarchy of epic values.

On the level of ideology, then, an apparent romance hero is neatly assigned a role in the epic cast of characters when his structural function is made explicit. Through the role of Ganor, a romance quest functions to complete the epic sequence of actions of the level of plot, and the romance value of love moves to a dominant position in the moral scheme of the poem. But romance never becomes autonomous. It is firmly anchored into the chanson de geste frame by the romance hero's conversion to Christianity which reaffirms the dominance of Christian over pagan, the basic ideology of medieval French epic. However, it is marriage, not conversion, that is the final act of the hero, and from the perspective of romance, the marriage theme takes on additional significance.

By definition, marriage is a union of male and female, and as such, in the neo-platonic tradition described by J. Ferrante, it serves "as a metaphor for the reconciliation of opposites, as well as the means by which God's plan is carried out within the moral order."¹⁵ In *Aye*, the theme of marriage reinforces the unity of the plot and thus effectively counterbalances the conflict pattern which otherwise dominates. In other words, although the narrative structure of *Aye* is characterized by binary opposition in the form of confrontation between irreconcilable enemies, a pattern common to epic, the thematic structure of the text emphasizes a resolution of the conflict that does not depend on armed victory but instead on love and marriage.

With this displacement of emphasis from conflict and war to love and marriage, the woman's predominant role in *Aye* is no longer problematic. If we consider the other side of the sex switch, when the "enamoured" Saracen

princess becomes a man, then the Christian hero becomes a woman. This variation of structure, important for bringing love to a new place in the hierarchy of values in the poem, also means that a woman is now able to represent the Christian collectivity. Such a situation might imply that this poem is an exceptional case of medieval feminism, but it is more likely that a woman can fill the structural slot of a man because war is no longer the only action with meaning in the Christian universe.

The impact of romance, then, on *Aye* goes beyond a resolution of an incomplete epic plot or a new perspective on morality based on love. What results is a change in the content of the Christian ideology that informs the deep structure of epic. A brief comparison of the conversions of Bramimonde in *Roland* and Ganor in *Aye* will reveal the extent of this change. Christian dominance in *Roland* is ultimately achieved by Charlemagne's victory over the Saracen forces led by Baligant. Love is not a weapon used in the battle; it is an afterthought. Only Bramimonde is converted "par amour." As G. J. Brault notes, this exception shows that spiritual conquest follows military victory.¹⁴ In *Aye* where the armed confrontation between pagan and Christian is relegated to the background, the forms of persuasion are instead education and love. Ganor acknowledges the superiority of French military skill when he learns fencing from Christian prisoners captive at his court and hires French mercenaries to fight for him. This knowledge, combined with love for *Aye*, wins him over to the fold without a single loss in battle.

We can account for the difference between Ganor's conversion "par amour" and Bramimonde's not only because of the love theme but also because of the augmented value of the individual in romance. As an example of the salvation of a single soul, Bramimonde's transformation into Queen Juliana depends on the prior collapse of her community. The effect of romance emphasis on the individual is to prove Christian dominance without recourse to annihilating the opposition. Nevertheless, in *Aye* as in *Roland*, despite the different means, the end is the same and Christianity triumphs.

In essence, romance morality based on love and individuality revitalizes the epic Crusade ethos in *Aye d'Avignon*. A strict moral interpretation according to religious identity—"Païen unt tort e Chrestiens unt dreit" (v. 1015, *Roland*)—is nuanced to allow for a Saracen ennobled by love and

influenced by Christian example not only to be "good" but also to lead a victorious battle against an evil Christian. Imagine Ganelon being punished for his treason by a soldier in Baligant's army! As the *miles Christi*, the knight in service of Christ, becomes a woman, the Crusade against pagans takes a new form, but despite the transformation of Christian values implied by the change, *Aye* still expresses the values of the Christian collectivity and performs the ideological function of epic.

Now it is possible to resolve the ambiguity of the genre identity of *Aye*. Although romance contributes significantly to the ideology of the text, it is ultimately incorporated into a *chanson de geste* structure. Assigning *Aye* to the *chanson de geste* tradition by interpreting the romance as a variation of epic convention strengthens the overall coherence of the work and explains otherwise perplexing details such as the predominant role of the woman and the theme of love. Besides pointing to a possible definition of a hybrid category based on the fusion of epic and romance both in plot and value structure, the process which unites the two genres is also important for understanding how the different genres generally perform different social functions.

We have seen how the varying relationship between hero and society determines not only the pattern of narrative but also the way the moral values are transmitted to the audience. Whether or not *Aye* is best described as a *chanson de geste* or a hybrid, a study of the relationship between epic and romance in one poem elucidates the process of communicating social values through literature and is therefore a step toward a socio-critical understanding of medieval genre.

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¹Charles Foulon, *L'Oeuvre de Jehan Bodel* (Paris, 1958), p. 601.

²Larry Crist, rev. of *Aye d'Avignon*, ed. by S. J. Borg, *Moyen Age*, 75 (1969), 575.

³S. J. Borg, ed. *Aye d'Avignon* (Geneva: Droz, 1967). All quotes refer to this edition.

⁴See William Calin, *The Epic Quest* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1966), especially pp. 3-57.

⁵Charles Altman, "Medieval Narrative vs. Modern Assumptions: Revising Inadequate Typology," *Diacritics*, 4 (1974), 18.

⁶Hans Robert Jauss, "Chanson de geste et roman courtois au XII^e siècle," in *Chanson de geste und Höfischer Roman* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1963), p. 72.

⁷See *La Lecture sociocritique du texte romanesque* ed. Graham Falconer and Henri Mitterand (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert & Company, 1975), especially Paul Zumthor, "Roman et histoire; à l'origine d'un univers narratif," p. 113 and Marie Louise Oilier, "Le Roman courtois: manifestation du dire créateur," pp. 175-188.

⁸P. Van Nuffel, "Problèmes de sémiotique interprétative: l'épopée," *Lettres romanes*, 27. (1973), 152-153.

⁹See Sara Sturm's list in *Olifant*, 3 (1976), 229.

¹⁰Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 326.

¹¹Van Nuffel, "Problèmes de semiotique interprétative," p. 157.

¹²Larry Crist, "Deep Structures in the Chansons de geste," *Olifant*, 3 (1975), p. 3-55.

¹³See Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 197. "It is in the differentiation of the sexes that we learn our earliest and deepest lessons about sameness and difference. Sexual differentiation is the basis, not only of our social systems, but of our logic as well."

¹⁴See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), for a philosophical and psychoanalytical analysis of the non-being of the female as Other.

¹⁵Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 43.

¹⁶Gerard Brault, "Truvel li unt le num de Juliane: Sur le rôle de Bramimonde dans la *Chanson de Roland*" *Mélanges le Gentil* (Paris: SEDES et CDU Réunion, 1973), p. 142.