

Late Medieval Precursors to the Novel: 'aucune chose de nouvel'

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There are no novels in medieval France, nor should we look for them. Establishing bootlessness straightaway makes us interrogate what we are doing when thinking about 'beginnings', why we are doing it, and what we mean by 'the novel' in the first place. This chapter's aim must be two-fold: to ensure that the medieval period is not unduly omitted from, or has possible pertinence unjustly disparaged in, a history of the novel in French, but also to avoid the period being falsely positioned or approached unhelpfully teleologically. Our interests are thus historical, methodological and theoretical, which introduces a third desirable outcome: to use dialogue between medieval and more modern perspectives to refine our reflection on a genre held to be 'a vast and perhaps ultimately unclassifiable area'.¹

Histories of the novel generally do one of three things to medieval literature: exclude, appropriate or both. They may dismiss the medieval period as totally lacking in pertinence, as when Ian Watt, defining formal realism as the novel's key criterion, perceived the genre's modernity to be 'decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage'.² Its literary culture is construed as irretrievably alien:³ a predominantly socially elite readership; the pre-print absence of any kind of mass production; oral transmission rather than written literacy; authority deriving from a body

¹ Timothy Unwin, 'On the Novel and the Writing of Literary History', in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel: From 1800 to the Present*, ed. by Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–15 (p. 2). An important intersection of medieval and modern that I omit here is the historical fiction of medievalism: see, for example, A. Tuaillon Demésy and L. Di Filippo (eds.), *Le Médiévalisme: Images et représentations du moyen âge* (*Interrogations*, 26 (2018)).

² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 12.

³ See Caroline A. Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction and the History of the Novel* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. xi.

of tradition rather than an individual author; prevalence of verse over prose; the valuing of rewriting above originality; non-linear narrative and abstract temporality; allegory; character typing; didacticism; and practices of compilation and circulation that do not fix a text's generic identity or its boundaries as a discrete entity.⁴ Alternatively, appropriation enables the modern critic to recognise the medieval as more legible in the terms of their present enquiry. Medieval romance (*roman*)⁵ sees flourishing irony, self-reflexivity, and parody,⁶ which speak to postmodern metafiction's assault on realist literature;⁷ compiled units of text – such as the branches of the *Roman de Renart* or *Prose Lancelot*⁸ – resemble serial publication practices of the nineteenth century. Where diachronic exclusion and synchronic appropriation judderingly collide, we often find a critical stance somewhere between caution and disparagement, and an almost exclusive focus on the *roman*: a claim is staked, but is then more or less relinquished. Cesare Segre famously revisited Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of the novel to insert the *roman*, which necessitated some modification of Bakhtin's system and came with caveats.⁹ Hubert McDermott, responding to Watt's omission of earlier periods, also accorded a place to the *roman*, but by way more of concession than enthusiastic allocation, offering fairly short-shrift treatment in comparison to classical predecessors.¹⁰ He concluded that it 'had little or nothing to offer narrative which had not already been created in ancient times'.¹¹ The medieval period emerges as an awkward misfit: 'an inconvenient and formulaic hiatus between the classical tradition and modernity'.¹²

⁴ As will become clear, I do not posit all these as necessarily true categorical distinctions, but as stubborn perceptions.

⁵ I use the italicised term to refer specifically to medieval romance.

⁶ Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 7.

⁷ Deborah McGrady, 'The Rise of Metafiction in the Late Middle Ages', in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. by William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond and Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 172–9 (p. 179).

⁸ Francis Gingras, 'Le Livre arthurien et la matière du roman', *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society*, 62 (2010), 277–306 (p. 294).

⁹ Cesare Segre, 'What Bakhtin Left Unsaid: The Case of the Medieval Romance', in *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985), pp. 23–46.

¹⁰ Hubert McDermott, *Novel and Romance: The 'Odyssey' to 'Tom Jones'* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105. Some pre-twentieth-century histories – such as Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Lettre-Traité de l'origine des romans* (1670) – similarly dismiss the value of the *roman* in favour of older examples.

¹² Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 10.

Two questions arise: whether we *can* legitimately see medieval texts as forerunners of the novel, and whether *it is worth* seeing them in this light; the latter is the more important and will orientate what follows. Informed by Terence Cave's thinking about 'pre-histories' and 'pre-liminaries',¹³ I consider some methodological challenges to adopting a fruitful retrospective gaze on medieval textuality, specifically problems of teleology and etymology. I then focus on the *roman* as the genre most targeted in histories of the novel as a precursor, and uncover unexpected aspects of this point of comparison in light of the modern novel's and medieval romance's shifting generic and formal histories. This leads to brief examination of elements of form that promote modern–medieval literary dialogue, before concluding with a case study advancing a fresh approach to identifying what, in earlier texts, is beneficial to our thinking about the novel.

When Alain Robbe-Grillet frustratedly attempted to carve out a place for his work in the history of novel writing, he asked, 'whither the novel?'¹⁴ I ask the complementary and no less tricky question, 'whence?' Both are somewhat unanswerable, given a genre's continuous state of flux and the tension between two fundamental truths of critical enquiry: 'men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning [. . .] No retrospect will take us to the true beginning.' Cave quotes George Eliot's epigraph in *Daniel Deronda* when reflecting how to avoid an origin-orientated approach to literary history and how, positively, to 'restore pre-liminary phenomena to their status as non-teleological traces'.¹⁵ When undertaking a project that seems 'intrinsically teleological and evolutionary'¹⁶ – for Cave, locating the early modern; for us, locating medieval precursors to the novel – how can we 'read without distortion the signs of a future story'?¹⁷ We cannot deny hindsight; rather, we must acknowledge its 'ineradicable presence in the writing of all history in order to limit and control, as much as possible, its interferences'.¹⁸ To do so, Cave suggests a productive synthesis of theory and

¹³ Terence Cave, *Pré-histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva: Droz, 1999).

¹⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 13.

¹⁵ Cave, *Pré-histoires*, p. 177.

¹⁶ Terence Cave, 'Locating the Early Modern', in *Theory and the Early Modern*, ed. by Michael Moriarty and John O'Brien (*Paragraph*, 29 (2006)), 12–26 (13).

¹⁷ Terence Cave, 'Master-Mind Lecture: Montaigne', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 131 (2005), 183–203 (186).

¹⁸ Anna Holland and Richard Scholar, 'Introduction', in *Pre-Histories and Afterlives: Studies in Critical Method*, ed. by Anna Holland and Richard Scholar (London: Legenda, 2009), pp. 1–13 (p. 3).

history: 'a methodological consciousness that is informed about theoretical arguments without prematurely buying into them or using them as a teleology, one that remains close to critical practice, and hence to the needs of the materials that are the presumed object of study'.¹⁹ Listening attentively to one's materials is key – especially when addressing the fragmentary and shifting history of early textuality, such as the *roman's* generic identity and material record. Francis Gingras sees the 'codicological bricolage' of Arthurian romance to make it 'in its materiality, a work in progress',²⁰ and, as Simon Gaunt notes, manuscript compilations from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries do not tell us about the original transmission and reception of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *romans* that they contain.²¹

Problems with Teleologies

When defining a literary production as 'pre-liminary', all depends on where and how you position your threshold. Watt, we saw, identified the advent of formal realism in eighteenth-century individualism, but realism is a particularly shifting threshold criterion,²² and by no means an objective one: 'as most theories of the novel emerge from the period when realistic fiction was at its height, it is no surprise that its parameters have been the novel's benchmark'.²³ Thresholds are relative entities: when John Lyons observes that, 'from a nineteenth- or twentieth-century perspective, *La Princesse de Clèves* appears to be a prototype of the *Bildungsroman*',²⁴ one could respond that, from a seventeenth-century standpoint, the same could be said of a thirteenth-century *roman*.²⁵ George Saintsbury, taking a long view, works between thresholds, moving from the 'late classical stage', through the 'beginnings of prose fiction', to Rabelais, whom he posits as the first high-water mark: 'superior to any single person named and known in earlier French literature'.²⁶ The conceptual importance of thresholds is evident in

¹⁹ Cave, 'Locating the Early Modern', p. 16. ²⁰ Gingras, 'Le Livre arthurien', p. 284.

²¹ Simon Gaunt, 'Romance and Other Genres', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 45–59, (p. 50).

²² Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 135. ²³ Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 19.

²⁴ John Lyons, 'The Emergence of the Novel', in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 350–4 (p. 352).

²⁵ See Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 4.

²⁶ George Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1917), 1, pp. 2 (emphasis mine), 73 (emphasis mine), 106.

how perception of one inclines scholars to see evolution in action – a limen being exceeded marks a coming-into-existence of novelistic resemblance. Julia Kristeva sees the mid-fifteenth-century *roman Jehan de Saintré* as ‘perhaps the first writing in prose that could be called a novel’ because of its transitional status ‘at the threshold of two eras’,²⁷ whilst Jean-Charles Huchet asserts that the earlier, mid-twelfth-century *romans d’Antiquité* ‘marked the rise of the novel by breaking with one tradition [by which Huchet means abandonment of the *laisse assonancée*] and asserting the continuity of another [namely the connection with classical culture]’.²⁸

Models of literary history predicated on evolutionary thinking, which indulge rather than resist Cave’s ‘temptation of retrospective history’, are methodologically problematic.²⁹ Whilst crediting the ambition of Saintsbury’s voluminous endeavour, one notes the shortcomings in its treatment of the medieval period. He does not address 878 to 1500 as a single, and thus potentially homogenised, era, but the trail that he tracks through it is wholly conditioned by the texts’ future story, and is thereby distorted. The *Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie* is cast as ‘storytelling in its simplest form and on its smallest scale: but the essentials are there’;³⁰ the embryonic status that he accords it is both a measure of size (unexpanded) and a judgment of quality (undeveloped). In a neatly sequential concatenation, the saint’s life kick-starts the *roman*, and it is in ‘the Arthuriad’, understood as an overall body of material, that we find ‘the creation of the novel *in posse*, of the romance *in esse*’ (p. 33); his traces, unlike Cave’s, are avowedly teleological. Saintsbury strongly prefers prose over verse, seeing *romans* ‘[a]king actual prose form [turning] the French faculty for narrative [...] into channels of a very promising kind’ (pp. 9–10). Surface formal resemblance to the novel is propitious and leads to hierarchical privileging of the *Prose Lancelot* over its verse counterpart. He retrospectively imposes on prose *romans* an ‘evident desire for the accomplished novel’ (p. 72). Short stories (fabliaux, *lais*, etc.) are similarly prominent in Saintsbury’s etiologising narrative; again, the end is boldly in sight, as ‘they all exhibit a constant improvement in the mere art of telling [...] Their obvious destiny was to be

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 41–2.

²⁸ Jean-Charles Huchet, ‘The Romances of Antiquity’, in *A New History*, ed. by Hollier, pp. 36–41 (p. 37).

²⁹ Cave, *Pré-histoires*, p. 177.

³⁰ Saintsbury, *A History*, p. 6. Further page references are given in parentheses in the text.

“unrhymed” (p. 91) in the *nouvelle*. Such pitfalls still dog literary history; an evolutionary vocabulary persists in reflection on ‘the genealogical tree of the novel’,³¹ in use of the term ‘prototype’,³² and in framing statements like Segre’s that ‘medieval romance tried out for the first time procedures which were only to be perfected later’.³³ What comes chronologically later, it is implied, is thereby qualitatively better.

Any project proposing an overarching history or addressing the tensions in such an endeavour – like Jewers’s chapter subtitle: ‘toward and away from the prehistory of the novel’³⁴ – cannot but engage the language of teleology. It is, for example, a necessary inevitability to find, in the index, an entry for ‘novel (early history of)’.³⁵ A conceptual risk, though, is that it fosters chronological proximity as the preeminent criterion for affinity, with that proximity predicated on a narrative of progress. This is particularly unhelpful in the case of both the novel and the *roman*, given the variety in their development; the novel may have ‘been in an ongoing state of *becoming* since antiquity’,³⁶ but that is by no means a single, linear trajectory. The *roman* exists in verse and prose, but, contrary to Saintsbury’s ‘formerly . . . latterly’ arc, there is significant co-existing variation, as well as challenges posed by the surviving evidence (such as dating, reworking or translation) that ‘belie the notion of any simple “evolution” from verse to prose’.³⁷ In similar vein, Jewers points out how parody was an essential part of the *roman*’s generic identity from its earliest extant examples; it is not a feature arising as a mark of development over time.³⁸ She also wisely counsels not judging the presence of a criterion for novelistic identity (such as realism) solely by its most evident manifestations;³⁹ by extrapolation, one should not construct a narrative of progress predicated on a feature becoming increasingly prominent.

So, whilst being mindful of the need not to abandon historicisation, might we venture valid connections between medieval fiction and the novel of less

³¹ Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 74.

³² Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 7. ³³ Segre, ‘What Bakhtin Left Unsaid’, p. 29.

³⁴ Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 1.

³⁵ Sarah Kay, Terence Cave and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁶ Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, p. 4.

³⁷ Michelle R. Warren, ‘Prose Romance’, in *Cambridge History*, ed. Burgwinkle, Hammond and Wilson, pp. 153–63 (p. 162).

³⁸ Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, pp. 7, 5. ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

proximate temporal periods? For example, at least methodologically, there may be mutual benefit in aligning aspects of the *roman* with the *nouveau roman*: if Robbe-Grillet argues for the absurdity of using norms of the past to judge fiction of the present, is it any less absurd to enlist past norms to assess fiction of the yet-more-distant past? 'Why seek', as Robbe-Grillet puts it, 'to recover clock time in a narrative that is only concerned with human time? [...] Why persist in asking what someone is called in a novel that does not tell us?'⁴⁰ The parameters of 'human time' in the *roman* and *nouveau roman* are, of course, constituted quite differently (the feasts of a Christian calendar in episodic, cyclical time vs temporality dislocated from causality, repetitive with contradictions). Similarly, character anonymity operates according to different respective principles (typification vs fluidity), but the comparison between both textualities' apparent failures to qualify as novels, traditionally defined, is of value in revealing their specificities as well as the shifting sands of the genre itself.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are an especially interesting period, since it has been dogged by its own teleological framing that makes of it less a promising precursor than an age of decline that ushered in the following period only by creating desperate conditions for necessary renewal in the so-called Renaissance. This narrative of decadent degeneration, including deterioration in literary quality, derives from Johan Huizinga's conception of the 'waning' or 'autumn' of the Middle Ages in France and the Netherlands.⁴¹ It, like the vocabulary of novelistic prototypes, has been stubborn to shift.

Problems with Etymologies

The two points of contact in medieval literature most frequently evoked in histories of the novel are the *nouvelle* and *roman*, each with more or less clearly defined parameters.⁴² This bears witness to an etymological

⁴⁰ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 118. On the *nouveau roman*, see Chapter 28 below.

⁴¹ On which, see Rosalind Brown-Grant, *French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1–2. Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* [1919], trans. by Rodney J. Paton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴² For example, Mazzoni, *Theory*, pp. 85, 88; Lyons, 'Emergence', p. 350. There is usually little articulation of the cross-cultural and chronological relationship between the *nouvelle* and the *novella*.

inclination in the retrospective gaze, working across English and French vernaculars: *nouvelle* to novel, *roman* to modern *roman*. If we restrict the scope of *nouvelle* to the late medieval prose fiction designated thus by the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* (1462),⁴³ its conceptual appeal as novel precursor becomes apparent: its privileging of the ordinary, the recently and locally occurred, personally experienced tale; its favouring of an emerging middle class of character roles; and an evolutionary logic that has the short story grow over time into a longer narrative form. Whilst such trait-spotting might superficially satisfy a tick-list approach, it risks misleading us as to the nature of the medieval text: for example, whatever its characters' social class, the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* was composed at the Burgundian court of Philip the Good and dedicated to the duke.

An alternative etymological approach to the pertinence of 'nouvel' to the medieval history of the novel might privilege its contemporary lexical use: a taste for and a claim to novelty is advanced by many writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, affirming the proverb that 'all that is new pleases'.⁴⁴ The sense of 'nouvel' intended is not assimilable to 'originality', but nor would it be true to say that originality is anathema to medieval literary aesthetics. Encountering 'nouvel' in 'the present tense of [its] articulation',⁴⁵ rather than channelled through a distorting funnel of hindsight, yields a rich and contradictory picture. 'Nouvel' carries varying positive and negative value: it connotes the fickleness of fashion, modernisation that departs unduly from established authoritative discourse, appropriate refreshment of well-worn forms, renewal through translation, or the promotion of cultural progress. In particular, it denotes renewal in the sense of a fresh look at an existing matter in a new form. Guillaume de Machaut played deftly with the term in his last and longest lyrico-narrative poem (*dit*), *Le Livre dou voir dit*,⁴⁶ which, with a taste for anachronistic punning, one could read as a novel about no novel: his first-person persona wants to create something new ('chose nouvelle'), but finds himself in the dilemma of lacking any new material ('aucune chose de nouvel').⁴⁷ However, once he is furnished with

⁴³ Nelly Labère, *Défricher le jeune plant: étude du genre de la nouvelle au moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 2006), p. 163.

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *A New History of Medieval French Literature*, trans. by Sara Preisig (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 85.

⁴⁵ Holland and Scholar, 'Introduction', p. 4.

⁴⁶ Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou voir dit*, ed. by Paul Imbs (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1999).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, line 11 (p. 40), line 59 (p. 42).

a subject – his new beloved, Toute Belle – he cannot stop ‘re-newing’ in the compositions he sends her, using an existing ballad, for example, to create a fresh song that is brand new (‘moult nouviaux’).⁴⁸ Reworking, rather than being a sign of aesthetic decay, à la Huizinga, is promoted as dynamic adventure.⁴⁹ I spend time here on Machaut, for I wish to return to the *dit* at the end of this chapter as a less obvious, but particularly fruitful genre for reading against the modern novel.

‘Nouvel’ as ‘renewal’ is not confined to textual or musical composition, but is also evident in the material activity of manuscript compilation, which plays an important role in genre perception and definition, especially for the *roman*. This, in turn, renders an etymologising desire to construct a continuous thread from *roman* to modern French novel especially precarious. Some thirteenth-century codices combine the *romans* of Chrétien de Troyes with historical texts or with significantly contrasting material: hagiography, fabliaux or lyrics, in what Gingras calls ‘collections where the romanesque is assimilated with the anti-romanesque’.⁵⁰ He considers how collocation with Jean Renart and Raoul de Houdenc in Rome, Vatican Library, MS Vat. Reg. Lat. 1725 juxtaposes apparent inclination towards canon formation in Chrétien’s *romans* with varied experimentation, ‘an explicit desire to renew the genre’.⁵¹

Roman as a term to designate a type of text derives from the phrase *mettre en roman* (‘to put into the vernacular’); it thereby originally designated texts, the so-called twelfth-century *romans d’Antiquité* (*Roman de Thèbes*, *Roman d’Eneas*, *Roman de Troie*), that were translations from Latin. However, as we saw above with ‘nouvel’, what we mean by translation in a medieval context is creative adaptation, entailing addition of material, remodelling, contemporisation of setting, etc., as part of a promotion of the authority of the vernacular.⁵² In its more generalised use, *roman* has no fixed identity:

if some writers use the term in a manner that suggests a distinct category of text that we call romance, *roman* is not infrequently used to describe texts that we think of as belonging to other genres, while some ‘romances’ are called *contes* by authors or rubricators. Thus if the genre is unstable, so is the terminology used to designate it.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., letter 4 (p. 128). ⁴⁹ Cerquiglini-Toulet, *A New History*, p. 86.

⁵⁰ Gingras, ‘Le Livre arthurien’, p. 282. ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 283.

⁵² Huchet, ‘Romances’, p. 38. Such practices of adaptation are, of course, not exclusive to the medieval period: for example, Marie Darrieussecq’s *Clèves* (Paris: POL, 2011).

⁵³ Gaunt, ‘Romance’, p. 45.

So can we use the term *roman* with certainty to mean anything specific and of use to our enquiry?

A Fine Romance: Genre Problems

It is in how we handle the genre identity of the *roman* as a potential precursor to the novel that Cave's 'pre-historical method' becomes most helpful, especially his injunction to keep our sense of upstream and downstream contexts local to our materials and to maintain a firm hold on hindsight's retrospective gaze: 'our constructions of the past ought to be delicate and deliberately fragile constructions'.⁵⁴ Thus we see immediately the flaws of grand narratives that force continuity out of diversity by, for instance, fostering a supremely broad conception of romance as 'a "total" genre'⁵⁵ or collapsing the histories of romance and the novel into one another, as in Saintsbury's recourse to the conjoined, capitalised substantive 'Novel-Romance',⁵⁶ when what he seems actually to be striving after is, more loosely and generally, the first evidence of vernacular narrative fiction. Problems of terminology continue to beset any attempt at a long view of genre in the history of the novel and to encourage an expansive approach to categorisation: Mazzoni establishes an oppositional distinction that '*romances* tell adventurous, improbable stories about exceptional or unreal people; *novels* tell stories about relatively common people in relatively ordinary contexts', but goes on state more embracingly: '*nouvelle* and *roman*, *novel* and *romance* belong to the same literary space'.⁵⁷

We have already seen how *roman* has a far from stable meaning in the medieval period, invalidating any unitary categorisation or 'attempt to identify an archetypal romance'.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, literary history has persisted with a fairly fixed idea of 'the medieval romance',⁵⁹ which tends to be Arthurian, and that identification works either for or against it. On the one hand, it provides a convenient source for the *Bildungsroman* and for recognisable (masculinist) continuity: 'the link between love and chivalric exploits [...] remains functional all the way to the modern novel'.⁶⁰ On the other, it is a convenient stick with which to beat its thematic alterity

⁵⁴ Cave, 'Locating the Early Modern', 22.

⁵⁵ Segre, 'What Bakhtin Left Unsaid', p. 34.

⁵⁶ Saintsbury, *A History*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ Mazzoni, *Theory*, pp. 83, 85.

⁵⁸ Gaunt, 'Romance', p. 46.

⁵⁹ Segre, 'What Bakhtin Left Unsaid', p. 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

from modernity – its adventures, marvels and exoticism – or its weaknesses as a rather tired set of ‘old themes and materials’ being unimaginatively reworked over centuries.⁶¹ As Rosalind Brown-Grant notes, such blanket deprecation has proved critically enabling for how it justifies the spotting of exceptions, works that liberate themselves from the shackles of weary convention to be positioned as future-orientated in their anticipation of novelistic development, like Kristeva’s aforementioned privileging of *Jehan de Saintré* or Saintsbury’s praise for *Jehan de Paris*’s ‘zest and verve’.⁶²

Attentive listening to one’s materials has literalised pertinence to a period practising oral transmission of texts: their generic identity is inflected by how and to whom they were read. For the *roman*, this is usually held to be a court, and thus an audience constituted of those ‘of sufficient rank to participate in the court’s leisure activities’: noblemen, knights, court officials, noblewomen.⁶³ We should, however, remember that authors themselves were usually not nobles, but clerics often adopting a critical gaze on courtly life. They may interpellate a more socially inclusive audience; in the prologue to his late thirteenth-century Arthurian *Compilation*, Rustichello da Pisa addresses: ‘lords, emperors, kings, princes, dukes, counts, barons, knights, vassals, burghers, and all worthy men who wish to entertain yourselves with romances’.⁶⁴ Do we take him at his word, or does listening carefully here mean that we should question the self-promotional ‘marketing’ value of such a prologue? Looking ahead to the fifteenth century, what did its audiences find in Arthurian romance? Do we already see a retrospective gaze of nostalgia, for instance? Brown-Grant has argued persuasively for the *mises en prose*, and for chivalric literature more broadly, playing an important didactic role in offering models of behaviour for the French and Burgundian aristocracy: neither ‘escapist fantasy [n]or melancholic inspiration’, their commemoration of the illustrious feats of past (and present) chivalric heroes aimed ‘to stimulate the reader to imitate these deeds and, in turn, to write themselves into the annals of history’.⁶⁵ We should also be alert to the ways in which *romans* engage their own retrospective gaze and make-believe their own beginnings: Paris, BnF, MS fr. 1450’s arrangement of *romans* into a narrative sequence inserts Chrétien’s five into the body of Wace’s *Brut*, at the moment when Wace evokes the era of adventures at

⁶¹ McDermott, *Novel*, p. 99.

⁶² Saintsbury, *A History*, p. 103.

⁶³ Gaunt, ‘Romance’, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Paris, BnF, MS fr. 1463, fol. 1r.

⁶⁵ Brown-Grant, *French Romance*, pp. 3, 7.

Arthur's court; the unknown compiler suggests thereby 'a history and genealogy of the kings of England'.⁶⁶

The texts that I have considered so far as *romans* are all third-person narrative fictions. Michel Zink, however, applies the phrase 'romance of the self' ('roman du moi') to a thirteenth-century 'encounter between narrative and the subjective', notably in the genre of the *dit*, the umbrella name given to first-person lyrico-narrative poetry of the later Middle Ages.⁶⁷ Zink's evolutionary thinking marries developments in the 'adventure romance' with those of lyric poetry to yield 'a personal poetry playing on narrativity',⁶⁸ a more particularising, anecdotal mode of poetic self-expression than the universalising lyric voice. Whether Zink is thinking primarily upstream or downstream is unclear: is the 'roman' in 'roman du moi' a permutation of the medieval genre or a lexical manoeuvre looking ahead, prompting a trajectory from third-person twelfth-century romance that includes first-person lyrico-narrative poetry of the fourteenth century en route to the novel to come? Whatever the case, one hugely influential work encompassed by Zink's categorisation is *Le Roman de la rose* (c.1237–77). Whilst this poem declares itself explicitly to be a romance – 'this is the romance [li rommant] of the rose'⁶⁹ – it has troubled literary historians for its poor fit with what a *roman* supposedly is. Saintsbury disparages it for having a story 'of the thinnest kind';⁷⁰ he is not inaccurate in his assessment of limited narrative intrigue, but this makes it no less classifiable as a *roman*. As should have become clear by now, there is no set form.

Thinking Through Form

In moving towards an encounter between novelistic expectations of form and later medieval literature in the *dit*, I emphasise how it develops our sense of the texts' specificity and inflects our appreciation of the conventions we bring to bear, including their limitations. For example, I gestured above to audience composition: one might immediately disqualify medieval manuscripts

⁶⁶ Gaunt, 'Romance', p. 50; Gingras, 'Le Livre arthurien', p. 280.

⁶⁷ Michel Zink, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, trans. by David Sices (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 37, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. by Armand Strubel (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), line 37.

⁷⁰ Saintsbury, *A History*, p. 106.

from novelistic thinking for their socially elite readership.⁷¹ One might more interestingly distinguish between commissioning authority, performance audience and ownership; or probe what happens in the second-hand manuscript trade (e.g. amongst chancery secretaries around 1400),⁷² or the public of lawyers and clerks cultivated by early centres of printing in Paris and Lyon from 1470, or how some evidence for the correlation between income and book ownership relates not to quantity, but to execution quality.⁷³ These are necessarily local and fragmented pictures of reception and transmission; one does ill service to the evidence and to conceptualisation of the period's perceived contribution to the development of the novel to assert, as Kristeva does when launching her claim for *Jehan de Saintré* as proto-novel, that everything changed towards the end of the period, in order to open up a narrative of novelistic resemblance: 'the end of the Middle Ages [...] was characterised by a massive infiltration of the written text: the book ceased to be the privilege of nobles or scholars and was democratised'.⁷⁴ This is distorting, future-orientated overstatement.

At least three aspects of form require brief comment: text form (prose and/or verse), narrative structure (linear or otherwise) and paratext. There is also, of course, language – the parameters of what we understand by 'in French' in a medieval context. Anglo-Norman and Occitan material have been accorded significant importance in the development of the *roman*, notably Thomas's *Tristan* (c.1170), seen by Laura Ashe to take narrative fiction into new areas of interiority and the individual,⁷⁵ and *Le Roman de Flamenca*'s (c.1272) combination of critique and nostalgia for the courtly world of the troubadour *canço*.⁷⁶ Many literary histories construe passage into prose as a key threshold when assessing the novelistic quality of a work, and thereby see narrative fiction in verse to lie behind that threshold. A false sense of verse's anteriority has a parallel in critical approaches to the *roman*; I quoted Warren, above, pointing to the 'hazards of linear histories of prose romance'.⁷⁷ A significant negative consequence of evolutionary thinking is a false devaluing of verse; Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay make a striking observation about the conditioning force of the retrospective gaze: 'One

⁷¹ McDermott, *Novel*, p. 100.

⁷² Gingras, 'Le Livre arthurien', p. 300.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Kristeva, *Desire*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ Laura Ashe, *Early Fiction in England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Chaucer* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. xxv, 94.

⁷⁶ Gaunt, 'Romance', p. 53; Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*.

⁷⁷ Warren, 'Prose Romance', p. 156; see also Brown-Grant, *French Romance*.

reason why modern critics have underestimated the epistemic value of late medieval verse is that we are attuned by contemporary culture, where most literary genres seem set on a line of convergence with the novel, to attribute a disproportionate importance to narrative.⁷⁸ My current paragraph has, by way of illustration, been doing just that – treating ‘text’ and ‘narrative’ as synonymous, yielding to the tyrannical conceptual dominance of a ‘Novel-Romance’ model that I earlier decried and that should now feel methodologically inadequate. The final section of this chapter will consider the *dit*, which I have scrupulously, if awkwardly, been calling ‘lyrico-narrative’ to avoid identifying it distortingly as narrative.

Linearity as a distinguishing feature of the novel has been perceived as a stumbling block for any desired classification of medieval narratives as such, given the strong episodic and/or cyclical structure of the *roman*, *chanson de geste*, and other genres, coupled with their more abstract sense of chronology. One contributor to linearity that appears from the early fourteenth century is paratextual: division into articulated chapters. Paratextuality is generally little considered in histories of the novel, but is a dimension whose examination a medieval context requires and fosters. Inserted rubrics subdivide a text, with, in the case of *romans*, a delineation of chronological order: ‘firstly . . . afterwards/following . . .’⁷⁹ It would be tempting to see this ‘move towards narrative organisation’⁸⁰ as a teleological shift towards novel narrative, as if linearity were the norm towards which all deviation would necessarily, inevitably turn. Its significance is, however, more contextual: in a literary culture in transition between oral and written modes, textual division facilitated silent, personal reading;⁸¹ it also, in fifteenth-century Burgundian *mises en prose*, for example, enhanced the didactic impact of the narrative’s moral lessons through segmented delivery.

Consideration of chapter headings invites us to incorporate the material presentation of a text into definition of its generic identity; looking above at patterns of manuscript compilation has already underscored the importance of assessing genre dialectically and of acknowledging the contribution of several agencies to that conversation (commissioner, author, compiler . . .). Medieval manuscript evidence is, we must assume, fragmentary – we possess only what survives, and thus our constructions based on it should be fragile,

⁷⁸ Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay, *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval French from the ‘Rose’ to the ‘Rhétoriqueurs’* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 198.

⁷⁹ Gingras, ‘Le Livre arthurien’, p. 296.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Brown-Grant, *French Romance*, p. 8.

as Cave counsels. Surviving quantity is no precise gauge of contemporary importance, but can nonetheless serve as a corrective to the distorting retrospective gaze of modern popularity. Whilst Arthurian romance is the dominant genre in the eyes of most modern literary historians, the eight extant manuscripts of the now-canonical *Chevalier de la charrette* – Chrétien's tale of Lancelot that finds such privileged place in C. S. Lewis's seminal articulation of courtly love⁸² – compare poorly to the over one hundred copies of one version alone of the little-remarked hagiography, *La Vie de Sainte Marguerite*. That is, unless we entertain the hypothesis, ventured by Ashe for the fragmentary survival of Thomas's *Tristan*, that the *Charrette* was in fact far more numerous, and the paucity of surviving evidence is because copies were 'read and re-read to destruction'.⁸³ A striking feature of prose romances' manuscript tradition are the elaborate pictorial cycles that appear with the text.⁸⁴ I use the phrase 'appear with' to avoid retrospectively presupposing textual pre-eminence. The highly varied role of illustration in medieval manuscripts underscores the uniqueness of each book production: the items that it contains cannot be apprehended in the abstract, only concretely, as 'X copy of Y text in Z context', particularising genre definition and romanesque identity.

The Late Medieval *Dit*: 'Reflecting Otherwise'

It is with Cave's idea of examining pre-modern texts 'reflecting otherwise on analogous questions'⁸⁵ to those of the retrospective reader that I want to turn to the late medieval *dit*, not to identify it as a precursor to the novel, but instead to make a methodological point: thinking about the *dit* may help us think about the novel and refine *how* we think.

Literary history's treatments of the *dit* and of the novel share issues of blurred boundaries and capaciousness: indeed, both have been identified as 'for want of anything better' categorisations. Mazzoni speaks of the novel as 'polymorphic space providing a home for stories of a certain length that do

⁸² C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).

⁸³ Ashe, *Early Fiction*, p. 89.

⁸⁴ Roger Middleton, 'The Manuscripts', in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. by Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 8–92.

⁸⁵ Cave, 'Locating the Early Modern', 24.

not fall within the confines of more rigidly codified narrative genres'.⁸⁶ For the *dit*, Monique Léonard astutely perceives how such categorisation generates a self-fulfilling circle: works that do not readily fit a recognised genre fall susceptible to classification as *dits*, cumulatively becoming representative of what constitutes a *dit* and thereby resulting in our sense of a *dit* as 'any item [...] whose "distinguishing feature" is [...] that it doesn't belong to any specific "genre!"'.⁸⁷

Perhaps in consequence of its protean form, its negotiation of identity in relation to the medieval vernacular 'best-seller', *Le Roman de la rose*, and its increasing visibility as a verse form counterpointing the rise of narrative prose fiction, the *dit* was inclined to reflexivity, reflecting on its processes of composition and its nature as fiction. The French novel has been seen as 'quintessentially self-scrutinising'.⁸⁸ I do not mean to construct a false transparency between one reflexivity and another, ahistorically treating 'texts of the past simply [as] further grist for the powerful mill-wheels of theory'.⁸⁹ What the coincidence of technique should more fruitfully foster is contextualised study of how each is deployed to further writerly interests.⁹⁰ The fourteenth-century *dit* fashions its identity across the threshold between oral and written modes of communication and poetic composition – between song and book. It thereby often includes mixed references to audience acts of 'hearing' the sung or spoken word and 'seeing' the written page.⁹¹ It reflects on the writer's several identities as lyric poet, narrator-witness, scribe and editor, interrogating the scope of their responsibility for a work's production and reception.

Such interrogation entails oscillation between personal, individual experience and typified representation in a way that could be methodologically instructive for modern novel scholarship. For example, the *dit* problematises the truth of subjective experience (through plural perspectives on recollection, dream visions, disjuncture between experiential and narrating narrative voices, etc.).⁹² It dramatises the paradox in the literary representation of

⁸⁶ Mazzoni, *Theory*, p. 66.

⁸⁷ Monique Léonard, *Le 'dit' et sa technique littéraire des origines à 1340* (Paris: Champion, 1996), p. 350.

⁸⁸ Unwin, 'On the Novel', p. 13.

⁸⁹ Cave, 'Locating the Early Modern', 17. On theories of the novel, see Chapter 32.

⁹⁰ For example, for the role of reflexivity through parody in the *roman*, see Jewers, *Chivalric Fiction*, pp. 5–8.

⁹¹ See also McGrady, 'Rise'.

⁹² Fionnuala Sinclair, 'Memory and Voice in Jean Froissart's *dits amoureux*', in *Les voix narratives du récit médiéval: approches linguistiques et littéraires*, ed. by Sophie Marnette and Helen Swift (*Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 22 (2011)), 139–49.

emotional experience – the claim to singularity and exclusiveness that simultaneously renders it universally legible through discourse. Such concerns are encapsulated in the provocative title of Machaut's *Livre dou voir dit*. In short, for a literature often held at best to be embryonic of later developments, it already conducts a sophisticated exploration on its own terms.

The *dit* also contributes to thinking about particularity. When Ian Watt excludes medieval literature from categorisation as novelistic, he asserts that its Scholastic realist concerns oppose the particular, concrete objects of sense perception proper to the novel.⁹³ But the *dits* of Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart and Christine de Pizan are deeply, consciously engaged with issues of *cognitio singularis*, debating the relationship between the physical particular and the intellectual universal and resolving it in different ways,⁹⁴ in a mixed intellectual landscape;⁹⁵ the poetry works out a philosophy.

I have been referring to the *dit* as first-person 'lyrico-narrative' verse, a commonly deployed descriptor.⁹⁶ However, as an attempt to counter the tyranny of narrative in constructions of the novel's pre-history, this is not desperately successful: whilst it posits a hybrid identity, something *different from* narrative, it by the same token reaffirms a narrative template. *Dits*, from the *Rose* onwards, tell a story, insofar as a scenario is sketched – e.g. man in garden approaches and plucks flower – but the dominant mode of the tale's telling is more discursive, typically involving dialogue, monologue, analogy, descriptive amplification and allegory; 21,000 lines and very little action interpose themselves between man and rose. The actual forms involved in that telling are frequently mixed, incorporating both fixed-form lyric and so-called narrative verse (typically octosyllabic rhyming couplets, the norm for verse *romans*), and sometimes prose as well, as in the case of Machaut's *Voir dit*. The interplay of forms acts itself to raise the question of how most truly to tell the tale, and places the emphasis reflexively on the process of telling.⁹⁷

This final section has offered some demonstration, both of the principles of undoing teleological thinking about earliest vernacular precursors to the novel, and of what can be gained in doing so for the medieval and modern

⁹³ Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 11.

⁹⁴ Sarah Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁹⁵ Armstrong and Kay, *Knowing Poetry*, pp. 93–4.

⁹⁶ See Sylvia Huot, *From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁹⁷ Kay, Cave and Bowie, *A Short History*, p. 77.

objects of study themselves as well as for our methodologies as literary historians. The *dit* is not a medieval novel, but it helps us to think flexibly and in a different context about features that literary history has come to see as distinctly novelistic; it enables ‘reflecting otherwise on analogous questions’ and perhaps liberates us from anxieties of (dis)continuity attached to discussion of the *roman* and *nouvelle*. For Cave: ‘The movement upstream is only authorised if we continuously refuse the analeptic temptation, even if the question [in our case, novelistic identity] could not have been posed without there being a story that we got used to telling ourselves.’⁹⁸ A history of the novel tells a story about storytelling; late medieval France witnessed vigorous interest in the art of literary composition and an expanding sense of what storytelling could do – what manners of form it could take and what subject matters it could address. The work of Christine de Pizan would make for an important further case study – combining autobiography and political commentary, personal testimony and moralising universal history, individual narrative and allegory, and all that within single texts like the verse *Mutacion de Fortune* (1403) or the prose *Livre de l’Advison Cristine* (1405). It is not that such works do not measure up to classification as ‘a novel’, were one employing Saintsbury’s value-judgment scale, but that they exceed the definitional boundaries that we have retrospectively established as our dominant conceptual framework for literary history. In the early-sixteenth-century *Farce du vendeur de livres*, the colporter presents his wares:

Je n’ay que livres tous nouveaux
Composés tout nouvellement.⁹⁹

[I’ve only got brand new books / written very recently]

What we might want to call the novel has always been new.

Further Reading

Adams, Tracy, ‘Christine de Pizan’, *French Studies*, 71.3 (2017), 388–400

Brown-Grant, Rosalind, *French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

⁹⁸ Cave, *Pré-histoires*, p. 17.

⁹⁹ *Choix de farces, soties et moralités des XVe et XVIe siècles*, ed. by Émile Mabille, 2 vols. (Nice: Gay, 1872), 1, lines 69–70.

- Cave, Terence, 'Locating the Early Modern', in *Theory and the Early Modern*, ed. by Michael Moriarty and John O'Brien (*Paragraph*, 29 (2006)), 12–26
- Huot, Sylvia, *From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987)
- Jewers, Caroline A., *Chivalric Fiction and the History of the Novel* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000)
- Swift, Helen J., 'Telling Tales: What Is a Dit?', in *The First Manuscript of Guillaume de Machaut's Collected Works (BnF, ms. fr. 1586)*, ed. by D. Leo and L. Earp (Turnhout: Brepols and Tours, in press)