

## BOOK REVIEWS



Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance; Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), Middle Ages Series, pp. ix+292.

In a series of close readings of five twelfth-century French romance fictions, Matilda Bruckner explores how twelfth-century fictional texts self-consciously represent the poetic processes of interpretation, truth, closure. The detailed analyses of *Shaping Romance* demonstrate that the dissimilar texts we call “romances” form a single genre not because of a common narrative form, but because they treat similar concerns. Bruckner focuses on the diversity of romance, interrogating the staging of interpretation within romances; the role of language in the passage from oral to written forms of fiction; the questioning of conventional gender roles and generic conventions; and the status of truth in fiction.

Each of the five chapters of *Shaping Romance* provides a reading of one twelfth-century text; in each chapter Bruckner demonstrates how the story may be seen to speak about the concepts that shape it. These stories of love and chivalry are also stories about literary production, about poetic composition and the shaping of meaning. In each chapter detailed textual analyses lead to an examination of how the narrator’s relationship to his or her text echoes, repeats, and nuances the shaping performed by the narrative techniques that the author uses to create truth and closure in the narrative.

Throughout the book the formation of the couple is a privileged site of interrogation, and the couple is a logical focus since the union of lovers is the explicit goal of most romance plots. Bruckner sees the process through which lovers are united as a poetic process, as a working through of problems specific to romance narratives. Beginning with readings of the adulterous lovers in two versions of the Tristan story, Bruckner moves in subsequent chapters to a consideration of Guenevere and Lancelot in Chrétien’s *Charrete*, then to Melior and Partonopeu, and finally to the many forms of the couple in Marie’s *Lais*. Bruckner shows that the definition of the “proper” couple, the primary story of romance fictions, is a story told through definitions and redefinitions of the relationship between identity and power and between knowledge and truth.

It is in the chapters on *Partonopeu de Blois* and the *Lais* that gender is most explicitly a category of analysis. In *Partonopeu de Blois*, for example, Bruckner shows how the narrator plays with conventional gender roles and their reversals in a contested appropriation of power and knowledge. The romance links male and female roles to their definitions in lyric love poetry and in romance, only to reverse those conventions as it subverts the importance usually assigned to lineage, beauty, prowess, and individual worth in romance narratives. These gendered and generic reversals ultimately permit the formation of the couple Partonopeu and Melior. The analysis is meticulous and persuasive and suggests the presence in the medieval text of thoughtful author who carefully shapes his story as a complex narrative about love and poetry.

The portrait of the author as a self-conscious creator of a nuanced narrative structure is also central in Bruckner's final chapter which examines the *Lais* of Marie de France. Starting from the convincing thesis that the *Lais* form a coherent collection framed by *Guigemar* and *Eliduc*, she shows how selection and substitution provide a framework for reading the other *lais* and for reading the movement of the collection as a whole. Bruckner locates these processes within the couple: substitution and selection test the suitability of the partnership. Lovers, or potential lovers, are substituted one for another until an appropriate match is found; the appropriate couple then tests "the possibility of maintaining the unit of the couple in the face of pressures for continued substitution" (163). The definition of what makes an appropriate couple is precisely where Bruckner locates a discourse about truth, identity, knowledge that she extends in an interpretation of the poetic techniques of repetition and closure.

The critical valorization of the couple and on the ways in which couples are formed leads to many insights into the working of romance and demonstrates the intimate link between narrative process and narrative form. At times, however, the analysis seems limited by the paradigm. The contested formation of an ideal couple is recounted by many romance fictions, but a critical reading that privileges the union of the knight and the lady inevitably excludes alternative configurations of the relationships between romance characters. One might suggest that the primary unit of the *Tristan and Lancelot* stories is the triangle rather than the couple. The relationship between the husband, the wife, and her lover is a precarious but firmly maintained structure in stories of adultery. The triangle includes the couple formed by the adulterous lovers, certainly, but it also includes a male couple and a married couple. Bruckner suggests the importance of this structure as it is regendered in the relationship between *Guildelouc* and *Guilliadun* at the end of *Eliduc*, but she does not theorize it as an interpretative model.

There are many insights into the working of romance narratives in *Shaping Romance* that might be extended or nuanced with a more historicized view of gender and gender roles. Attempts to link the analysis to a social context are often tentative and take the form of unspecific references to the connection between romance and history. Bruckner claims that romance offers a "mise en abyme" of medieval feudal society, a fictional playing out of conflicts within society. She fails to articulate precisely what those social conflicts are, how they are represented in romance, and how they function to change medieval society.

Bruckner's primary focus is, however, on the poetic formation of individual texts. She explores a world that is highly textual and in which the author exerts a great degree of control over his or her material. *Shaping Romance* provides a detailed demonstration of how the narrative techniques that shape medieval romance fictions are part of an exploration by the medieval author of how poetry represents truth in fiction. Bruckner offers new readings of some of the best known medieval romance fictions, incorporating and synthesizing previous scholarship while staking claims to new insights. These meticulous and often innovative readings of romance fictions will be of interest to students and scholars of medieval literature.

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