Love Cures
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The Origin of Love Potion Number Nine?

Pop songs, television programs, and other forms of popular culture in our world today are replete with representations of romantic love as a form of intoxication, the beloved woman as capable of either bewitching or healing, and the idea that a couple’s love will result in a lifelong bond and happiness. Although we might assume that these notions have been with us for all time, I seek to determine how, where, and when they arose and how they came to be a part of the social construct of love. This study examines a central channel by which these ideas entered our discourse on love: the literary portrayal of healing and love magic (which fall into the larger category of empirical practices) that were found throughout medieval society. The texts I analyze portray only women as empirics (that is, those without formal training) and depict them healing and practicing love magic in plots centered on love and marriage. For these reasons, empirics in narratives of romantic love raise questions about women’s acquisition of specialized knowledge and their application of it in feudal marriage politics, in which their voices and their desires were easily muted. Women’s application of empirical knowledge in these circumstances highlights the contested and continuously negotiated position of women in society and the ways in which the construction of romantic and/or passionate love of women shapes that place.

Although this study covers only a little more than a century during the Middle Ages, understanding the forces shaping love at this time is vital for a thorough comprehension of modern, western constructions of love, power, and relations between men and women. Only by attending to the origins and the impact of such images will we be able to understand fully where we are today. Consequently, I invite to this discussion
not only specialists in medieval literature and women’s studies, but also a broad range of literary scholars and historians of all time periods whose expertise covers areas such as science, medicine, magic, and religion. I also seek to engage those from other disciplines in which love and marriage are studied, such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and biology. A topic as significant and broad as love can only benefit from multi- and cross-disciplinary inquiry.

How do texts of the time represent healing and love? A brief example illustrates what is in play. In Chrétien de Troyes’s *Erec et Enide*, we encounter an episode in which women with specific knowledge of medicine successfully heal Erec. Erec’s battle wounds are cared for by two sisters who demonstrate knowledge of wound management. In a description that provides a striking amount of medical detail, we learn that they remove the dead skin, apply ointment, and dress the wounds.¹ They encourage Erec to eat heartily and often, but allow no pepper or garlic.² Although Enide remains by his side during his convalescence and allows no one other than the sisters to touch him, it is the sisters’ ministrations—and not Enide’s loving care—that set Erec on the road to wellness. In a romance that centers on Enide’s constancy and devotion to Erec, we would expect Enide to demonstrate these traits during Erec’s illness. Yet even though Enide shows love that seems to reassure Erec as he heals, she lacks the sisters’ medical knowledge. *Erec et Enide* demonstrates that the sisters’ medical knowledge is crucial for Erec’s return to health and that this ability to heal is not a result of the lover’s presence: the romance distinctly separates healing and love.

In contrast, in the texts examined in this study—*Cligés*, the *Tristan* of Béroul and that of Thomas, the *Folie Tristan de Berne*, the *Roman de Silence*, and *Amadas et Ydoine*—healing and love intertwine to such a degree that the conceptions of both are altered. In all of these texts, except *Amadas et Ydoine*, a protagonist or her aide carries out numerous specific healing

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activities. A third strand, love magic, joins the other two in all of these works except for the *Roman de Silence*. Let us conceive of these domains—love, healing, and love magic—as sets. My goal is to concentrate on the areas in which they overlap in order to ascertain the effect of this combination on the individual elements during the high Middle Ages. I focus on women because Old French romance shows women, but very rarely men, in these roles, despite evidence that both women and men undertook healing and magical activities in the high Middle Ages.

3. The term “high Middle Ages” refers to the period at which medieval civilization was at its height. The dates given are approximately C.E. 1100–1350, though some prefer the more limited C.E. 1150–1300. The works in the study cluster around the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, with the exception of the *Roman de Silence*, which is dated to the last half of the thirteenth century. However, dates for works in this period are almost always approximate.

The chapters that follow analyze episodes in which empirics practice healing and love magic and show that the instances of sickness, injury, and amatory magic depicted formed a part of everyday experience—observable phenomena that audiences experienced. In short, they are quite realistic for the time. Moreover, their presentation is strikingly positive. The empirical practitioners are often well known and highly respected in their communities. They successfully diagnose and heal using methods of the day applied by healers trained formally or informally. They often surpass other healers in the region. These aspects of their healing practices are depicted without irony or parody, though the same kind of exaggeration applied to the male protagonists of romance (inevitably the “best knight”) often applies as well to these characters as they invariably meet with success. Their accomplishments help advance the notion that empirical practice was a domain open to women and one in which they could obtain both respect and success, although as we shall see, it was easily appropriated into the discourse of love.

Yet, with few exceptions, critics dismiss empirical practice with a wave of the hand. For example, in E. Peter Nolan’s analysis of the progression in Chrétien’s work from *Erec et Enide* through *Cligés* and *Yvain*, the critic describes a naïve and simplistic attitude toward herbal magic in *Erec et Enide* that is absent in Chrétien’s later work. The forest episode of *Yvain* in which the young maiden overzealously rubs the knight with a precious ointment obtained from Morgan la Fay corrects the earlier representation because, “In

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Rome, and the Byzantine Empire,” in *Women Healers and Physicians*, ed. Furst, who notes that such healers are not singled out because they are women (131–32), and that they trained in informal apprenticeships (135), two conditions that hold for the women in this study. Brief accounts are found in Margaret Wade Labarge, “Medieval Women as Healers and Nurses,” in *Women in Medieval Life: A Small Sound of the Trumpet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), and Thomas Benedek, “The Roles of Medieval Women in the Healing Arts,” in *The Roles and Images of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead (Pittsburgh: Center for Medieval Renaissance Studies, Institute for Human Sciences, 1975).

poking fun at the traditional trappings of herbal magic Chrétien is also poking fun at the traditional stories, like the *Erec*, in which herbal magic is taken seriously.”  

Certainly the maiden’s enthusiasm provides an element of humor, but as we shall see, medieval medicine, both empirical and learned, relied on herbal preparations for healing and both types of medical practice included magical practices in healing. Although the tendency has been to assume that empirical practices, especially those carried out by women, could not have been taken seriously by more sophisticated medieval individuals, careful readings will show that this was not at all the case.

The analyses that follow are a function of literature’s capacity to represent the world—and here my theoretical position is a bit like walking a tightrope. Because empirical practitioners have been labeled as examples of the fantastic or the symbolic, I have relied upon a large body of history of medicine and magic in order to demonstrate that romance representations correspond to historical examples.  

This move is necessary to recuperate these figures from the fairy wonderland to which they have been exiled—I seek to establish them as realistic, not fantastic. The danger of such a move is the assumption that the documents traditionally used by historians (i.e., the non-literary sources) offer transparent, unmediated representations of empirical practitioners, while literature offers only fanciful ones. Like many recent literary critics and historians, I take issue with the analysis of episodes or events as simple mimetic representation in both literature and other sources of documentation. All of these texts form a part of the historical discourse with the power to shape ideology; all help produce and reproduce world views. Following in the footsteps of many recent critics of romance, I read

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7. Romance is a medieval genre that depicts quests for adventure and love among the aristocracy in the Middle Ages. Early romances were composed in verse (octosyllabic couplets, or rhyming lines of eight syllables each), while later ones were in prose. Two short versions of the Tristan story, the *Folie Tristan de Breme* and the *Folie Tristan d’Oxford* are not, strictly speaking, romances. However, because they do not fit neatly into any medieval genre and because they are closely related to romance, I treat them as romance derivatives that belong to my general discussion of romance.

the texts as indicators of social and cultural phenomena with the potential to shape and change attitudes, not merely as a record of attitudes.\(^9\)

In order to facilitate a clear understanding of how medieval audience members would have interpreted empirics in romance, I focus first in each chapter on establishing them as accomplished and well received in the same manner as they often were in medieval society. I then consider how their depiction shapes phenomena in their world—most importantly, love and its role in marriage. Through that analysis, I argue that the depiction of empirical practices invites the movement of new tropes from those practices into the representation of love in the romances considered. These tropes add new aspects to the medieval conception of love, many of which still resonate today. In short, empirical practice as portrayed in romance alters the understanding of what love is and how it functions. By forging much stronger links than previously seen between the female beloved and healing capacities, between feelings of love and those of intoxication, and between love and rationales for marriage, these romances recast the conception of love.

Why these particular romances? The episodes of healing and love magic analyzed are not merely plot digressions of these narratives. The empirics apply their knowledge and skills in the context of the love stories that form the *sine qua non* of romance plots. In all the cases they are deeply involved (and in all but *Cligés*, personally involved) in the marriage politics of the court. The question of how (or if) romantic love should have a place in marriage is addressed in these works through one specific narrative thread, the story of Tristan and Iseut (known to some by her German name, “Isolde”). Perhaps the best known medieval lovers, their adulterous passion tears apart the society in which they live because Iseut was married to King Mark of Cornwall in a union made to bring peace between Mark and Iseut’s father, King of Ireland. The Tristan story was well known in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the numerous versions in Old French (the first language in which it was recorded in written form) and by the various medieval translations and adaptations into other languages. Medieval composers and authors often sought to take a known subject such as that of Tristan and Iseut and impart their own understanding of it through the details of their individual versions.

Long derided as unoriginal, the romance tendency to reapply and reinvent has come to be seen as a hallmark of the genre. This conception of storytelling is one reason for the myriad of versions of the tale, but of course storytellers would not have repeatedly seized on this particular material if audiences had not expressed enthusiasm for it. We know that medieval models of marriage, based as they were on the promotion of family and dynastic economic and social interests, did not consider the feelings of the couple—yet those sentiments existed. The story of Tristan and Iseut dramatizes the individual and societal conflicts that result from a marriage model that excludes the feelings of the couple, but it does not in any way seek to resolve the dilemma: the story concludes with the death of the lovers.

If composers were drawn to the sadness of the unresolved conflict, it seems that they also appreciated stories that offered resolution: all the other romances in the study rewrite parts of the Tristan and Iseut story in ways that avoid or resolve the problem, and critics have pointed out the intertextual relationships among these works. Cligés has been seen both as an anti-Tristan and a neo-Tristan. Although less studied, Amadas et Ydoine has been read through these same filters. While most criticism on the Roman de Silence focuses on the latter two-thirds, I analyze the opening third, showing how it relates to both the Tristan legend and to Cligés. These romances, like many others, form a part of what Michelle Freeman has called the “links in a textual chain—a textuality,” each of which contributes to a continuing dialogue. Freeman even locates Chrétien’s rewriting of the Tristan tale as the beginning of a continuing intertextual dialogue.

Finally, though it is far from the central point of my work, I suggest ways in which romance may shape actual healing practices. Readers will likely recognize an underlying principle of historical dialectism in my approach: romance shapes notions of love and healing at the same time that is shaped

by empirical practice. The representation of healing in romance may very well be a factor, consciously recognized or not, in the changing relationship between medical theory and practice of the thirteenth century.

In the end, romance reveals women’s empirical practice to be a force of change at court, but one that is tightly bound to romantic love. This binding together expands the role of medical and pharmacological discourses in descriptions of love even as it further defines women’s practical medicine. The romances also highlight the power that empirical practice gives women and the degree to which this power threatens the dynastic marriage system.

Approaching the Middle Ages

A few fairly common misconceptions about the Middle Ages, witchcraft, and demonology need to be dispelled before readers can fully appreciate the significance of the claims I make here. In some cases the mistaken notions were furthered by medievalists themselves, but since most of them are no longer current in medieval studies, specialists in the field may wish to skip this section. I provide first some general observations on the construction of the Middle Ages themselves, especially in contrast to the Renaissance, followed by a discussion of received ideas of magic and witchcraft in those time periods. My intent is to show that oversimplified, dichotomous notions of periodicity (Middle Ages versus Renaissance as black-and-white terms), especially with respect to magic and witchcraft, have led to thoroughly wrong ideas of medieval healing and magic.

To consider the Middle Ages from a scholarly perspective can be very disconcerting. On one hand, the medieval world offers images that accord with our own world: comfort and solace in love, the necessity of maintaining political alliances, and the role of status in shaping interactions between individuals. On the other hand, and far more often than not, an observer and interpreter of the Middle Ages from the twentieth or twenty-first century is befuddled before a world organized so very differently from our own, one in which love potions, feudal bonds, and lords and ladies play roles we only dimly grasp.

In popular reconfigurations, the poles may be even further apart. Modern appropriations of medievalia, such as literary works from T. S. White’s The Once and Future King and Marion Zimmerman Bradley’s The Mists of Avalon or the recreation of medieval life by members of the Society for Creative
Anachronisms, bespeak a fascination with the period. At the same time, however, the pervasive notion exists that the Middle Ages was nothing more than a thousand years of stultification with no advances or cultural high points in which people followed the dictates of the Church like sheep and were motivated only by thoughts of the next life.

Yet as critics and historians, we have only ourselves to blame, for it is through our predecessors that such ideas flourished. Francesco Petrarch, who celebrated Roman culture and writings and disparaged his medieval predecessors, wrote of his dislike for the time period in which he was born. Petrarch’s insistence on the importance of antique literary models was so successful that today we use the term “Petrarchian conceit” to describe a besotted, helpless lover who beseeches a haughty, cruel, and distant lady for her love without so much as a thought to Petrarch’s debt to the lyric poetry of the troubadours of eleventh- to fourteenth-century southern France for the elaboration of that image. In the fifteenth century, the bitter fights of humanists against their scholastic predecessors—perceived as outmoded and lacking intellectual rigor—further established the idea of the Middle Ages as a cultural wasteland. Late medieval and early modern intellectual battles put forth an image of the Middle Ages as a time when hardly any new ideas emerged and those that managed to were squelched by authorities. In contrast, the label “Renaissance” (more commonly referred to by scholars today as the early modern period) said it all: a period in which new ideas were enthusiastically taken up, fear and superstition did not limit progress, and benighted ideas were shed as human beings came to a more nuanced understanding of the human condition.

If we can locate the beginnings of the tendency to oversimplify the Middle Ages in an attempt to curtail medieval approaches to learning by the rival humanists that followed the scholastics, we can also historically situate the opposite reception of the Middle Ages in nineteenth-century romanticism. The romantic approach to the Middle Ages is perhaps best known through a work such as Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The medievalism of the romantic period both glorified and misrepresented the Middle Ages.

Vestiges of that misrepresentation remain with us today.\textsuperscript{16} With respect to the study of witchcraft, the most well-known romantic work is that of Jules Michelet, who argued that fourteenth-century witchcraft was a repressed form of social revolt.\textsuperscript{17} Michelet’s style can be best appreciated through a quotation:

Think of the power wielded by Satan’s Chosen Bride! She can heal, prophesy, predict, conjure up the spirits of the dead, can spell-bind you, turn you into a hare or a wolf, make you find a treasure, and most fatal gift of all, cast a love charm over you there is no escaping! Awful attribute, more terrible than all the rest put together! How should a headstrong spirit, more often than not a wounded spirit, sometimes one altogether soured by disappointment, fail to use such a weapon for the satisfaction of hatred and revenge, and sometimes for the indulgence of perverse and foul proclivities?\textsuperscript{18}

The two poles, denigration and dismissal of the Middle Ages or glorification and exaggeration of the time period, become all the more intriguing when we remember that Romantics often glorified what had previously been dismissed.

Romantic élan notwithstanding, one of the most pervasive myths since Petrarch’s time has been a simplistic view of periodicity according to which the Middle Ages is considered a time of complete stagnation and benightedness, while the early modern period is hailed as a time of great awakening and moving forward. This received idea persists despite the fact that historians, both in their archival work and textbooks, call it into question.\textsuperscript{19} It often appears in popular culture. I once heard a popular historian speak on her study of a seventeenth-century Italian woman. The speaker marveled that in her research of the period she had learned that “everything really did begin in the Renaissance.” She is not alone, for the idea still has common currency.

The notion of an entirely backwards Middle Ages and a purely progressive early modern period helps to maintain another mistaken assumption: that

\textsuperscript{16} Daniel Poirion urges us not to make the sort of mistakes that Viollet-le-Duc made on the sculptures of Vézelay when he attempted to restore them to the forms of the Middle Ages. See Poirion, “Le Tristan de Béroul: Récit, légende, mythe,” \textit{L’Information littéraire} 26 (1974): 206.


\textsuperscript{18} Michelet, 89–90.

\textsuperscript{19} For a textbook discussion, see Thomas F.X. Noble, Barry S. Strauss, et al., \textit{Western Civilization: The Continuing Experiment} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), esp. 511–12.
witchcraft, demonology, and the prosecution of those acts were primarily medieval phenomena, not early modern ones. An example can be found in the third book of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, which opens with Harry writing an essay entitled “Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless” Harry’s research for the essay states that “Non-magic people … were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it.” The essay topic and the textbook quotation that Harry uses suggest that the fear and persecution of the witch-hunt were late medieval phenomena and that medieval people were particularly gullible, despite considerable research to the contrary.

The implied notion that the fourteenth century was one of the highest points of fear of magic and witchcraft directly contradicts the chronology and specifics that historians have established. For Jeffrey Burton Russell, the mid-fifteenth century (from 1427, when theologians began writing more discourses on witchcraft, to 1486, with the publication of Malleus Maleficarum) is the pivotal time during which “the witch phenomenon became thoroughly articulated. Ideas that had previously remained distinct were now joined in a whole.” For Russell, those ideas include: sacrifice to demons; pacts with the devil; night flights on brooms, sticks, or beasts; sexual orgies, murder, and cannibalism; special salves or ointments; a focus on heresies such as the renunciation of faith; the sacrifice of infants to Satan; Devil worship; and heretical night meetings. Only after this conceptual shift was in place did witchcraft prosecutions begin to increase. Witch hunts were at their zenith in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They cannot be considered an anomaly: “The witch craze was not an aberration in the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the contrary, witch hunting reflected the darker side of the central social, political, and cultural developments of the time.” Historians have also called into question other arguments. Russell finds in nineteenth-century historians of witchcraft an anticlericalism that led

22. Russell, 229–43.
to an inflated sense of the role of the medieval Catholic Church in creating the witch hunts. Norman Cohn’s chapter “How the Great Witch-Hunt Did Not Start” reveals that late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century trials in southern France and Italy that were long hailed as the beginnings of the movement were, in fact, fabrications. Richard Kieckhefer makes a convincing case that notions of devil worship were passed from the intellectual elite to peasants during trials and had no basis in peasant belief.

Additional work has broadened our understanding of the witchcraft persecutions. Helen Rodnite Lemay’s reading of thirteenth-century natural philosophy of women argues that these works directly influenced the presentation of women in Kramer and Sprenger’s 1486 *Malleus maleficarum*. By the sixteenth century, demonology and magic overlapped significantly; juridical procedures including the Inquisition and torture were established and Reformation conflicts had increased belief in diabolical conspiracies. Other scholars have analyzed the prosecutions through lenses such as gender, sexuality, and psychology.

Literary critics have also contributed to growing knowledge in this and related areas, especially in light of specific discourses of healing or medical or scientific theory current at the time of those texts. Dana E. Stewart applies twelfth-century optical theory to elucidate the love scene of Soredamors and Alexander in *Cligés*. With respect to healing, Jean Dangler argues persuasively that in three Iberian texts dating from 1460 to 1528, the authors use misogynist textual strategies to deride female healers while glorifying male

26. See Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 181–201. This is only one of the myths about European witchcraft that Cohn persuasively argues against. He shows that the juridical and societal changes that helped create the witch hunts were only late medieval phenomena whose effects were felt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
physicians and the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Literary studies such as those by Stewart and Dangler imply a need for more analysis of literature in light of the evolving discourses of science, medicine, and healing, a need I address in part in this study.

Outline of This Study

Chapter 1 provides a framework for the study by supplying background material in several areas. Medieval magic and medicine are surveyed, followed by a brief discussion of the marvelous, which differs from the other phenomena but has often been conflated with them. Chapter 1 also summarizes research on medieval marriage and courtly love. This last section especially may help to orient those on less familiar terrain, since the scholarship on romantic love in the Middle Ages is vast and full of disagreements.

Chapter 2 takes up Cligés by Chrétien de Troyes. Its main story depicts the love of Cligés and Fenice, who are aided by Fenice’s handmaiden, Thessala. Thessala’s numerous activities in healing and love magic make an ideal place to begin an examination of empirical practice and its implications for romance. The analysis of Thessala reveals neither a mythic witch (based on classical antecedents) nor a questionable charlatan, but rather an empiric whose skills and knowledge in healing and potion mixing enable her charge, Fenice, to marry the man she loves.

Chapter 3 considers the early Tristan narratives, concentrating on the fragments of Thomas d’Angleterre and the translation and adaptation of that work. Both Iseut and her mother engage in healing activities, and her mother is, of course, responsible for the infamous love potion that brings Tristan and Iseut together. In this chapter, I offer a means to read the love potion as a part of empirical practice rather than as purely symbolic, as it has been interpreted in the past, and analyze how such an approach alters our understanding of the Roman de Tristan. I also take up Iseut’s dual role as a healer and as the beloved in order to show how the discourse of healing in the work allows for the conflation of Iseut’s healing capacities with her function as the beloved. This overlapping and intermingling of roles has the potential to influence the image of the beloved in works that come after the Tristan story.

Chapter 4 treats the other important early branch of the Tristan materials available in Old French, that of Béroul, and one of its derivatives, the *Folie Tristan de Berne*. The remaining fragments of Béroul’s text have challenged scholars for many decades, in part because there are many internal contradictions. Béroul’s competing claims are the basis for an examination of empirical practice in which it is left up to the reader to interpret its meaning in the romance. Disparate points of view, this time between Tristan and Iseut, also furnish the subject of analysis in the *Folie Tristan de Berne*, which recounts most of their love story, but from the perspective of Tristan when he returns to Mark’s court disguised as a fool in a desperate attempt to see Iseut again. In Tristan’s retelling of their love story, he ascribes to Iseut new and impressive empirical abilities that must be considered in the context of Tristan’s attempts to obtain Iseut’s recognition. Both texts point up the multiple interpretations to which empirical practices are subject and the necessity of skepticism in assessing them.

Chapter 5 treats the *Roman de Silence*, focusing on the first third of the work in which Silence’s parents, Cador and Euphemie, meet and fall in love. Although this romance was composed some one hundred years after the other works, it depends heavily on the works that precede it for its representation of both love and empirical practice. We see this especially in the depiction of Cador and Euphemie when they fall in love. Although their love comes on naturally without the help of any outside force such as a potion, the description of their love is deeply influenced by the discourse of love magic. In addition, I compare the three marriages in the *Roman de Silence* to show how the society responds to the notion of love as a necessary condition for marriage.

Chapter 6 looks at a romance that is in many ways a counterexample because of its mockery and grotesqueness, *Amadas et Ydoine*. Rather than depicting empirical practice per se, this text shows activities akin to them but with substantial differences. Although Ydoine has no training as an empiric, she is able to heal her lover. In the mocking tone of this work, empirical practice has disappeared altogether, while its effects have been thoroughly incorporated into the representation of the beloved. *Amadas et Ydoine* also ridicules the notion that a woman in love can wisely choose the man she will marry, despite the fact that it concludes with the community’s endorsement of the engagement of the loving couple.