
The present work represents a collaboration between five experts in the field of medieval French literature. It was felt by the authors that there has been a considerable gap in the publication of books on the subject of Chrétien de Troyes, other than those directed at the ‘student market’. They further felt that the conventional approaches to Chrétien and his work could be and should be challenged and that a fresh look at the Chrétien corpus was necessary. The aim of the book is to see the works of Chrétien de Troyes not as the product of a singular historical figure but as a window on the social and intellectual milieu of twelfth-century Troyes and the Champagne region where Chrétien worked. Its further purpose is to see Chrétien’s romances, which are usually regarded as superior to his ‘lesser works’ (i.e., the songs and the poem Philomena), as representing long poems, thus suspending the hierarchy between the two different types of work. Since the authors distance themselves from the idea of an individual author, the approach is therefore not one of singularity, but of plurality. This plurality can already be felt when considering the different meanings of the title: ‘Thinking “through” Chrétien de Troyes’ stands for ‘thinking through the eyes of’ or ‘thinking via’, for ‘thinking beyond’ but also for ‘thinking through’ in the sense of ‘thinking until one reaches a conclusion’ or ‘understanding through a process of thought’ (2).

Chrétien de Troyes, if we accept the assumption of one historical individual, lived in a time and place of literary and intellectual florescence: twelfth-century Troyes was one of the northern French centres of the *translatio imperii et studii* — the transfer or translation of literary, ecclesiastical and political ideas in the great shift from East to West — and the birthplace of the great ecclesiastical scholar Peter Comestor whose *Historica Scholastica* was
copied in more than 800 manuscripts (7). It was further the birthplace of one of the earliest translations of biblical texts into the vernacular Old French (commissioned by Marie de Champagne), as well as being a centre of both Christian and Jewish biblical exegesis in general (7). It is not surprising then, to read about the hypothesis of a ‘Troyes style’, as distinct from the style of an individual author. Besides being a centre of cultural innovation, twelfth-century Troyes also had a political status advantageous to the flourishing of the arts in that it represented a comital city independent from the sway of the King of France. It saw its heyday under the rule of Henri I the Liberal, Count of Troyes during the second part of the twelfth century. Henri’s rule also had an effect on the status of women, who appear more and more frequently in public records relating to inheritance or custody. In the authors’ words, then, ‘the toponym “de Troyes” thus locates the Chrétien romances amidst a modernizing milieu of secular literacy and the acknowledgment of female authority’ (9).

The work is divided into an introduction (of which I have just given the main points), five chapters, an epilogue and appendices. It contains no conclusion as such, the final chapter being entitled ‘Forgetting to Conclude’. Each author has contributed one chapter to the book; and each chapter is devoted to a particular theme. These themes include time and temporality, the relationship between the sense and the intellect, and knowledge and memory through the eyes of Chrétien’s romantic characters. In terms of material, there is some overlap: Chapter One considers two short poems by Chrétien in conjunction with *Cligès*, the latter also forming part of the analysis in Chapter Five. Chapter Two focuses on *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (*Lancelot*) and *Guillaume d’Angleterre*, *Lancelot* being discussed again in Chapter Three. *Le Conte du graal* is the subject of detailed examination in Chapter Three and to a lesser degree in Chapter Five; *Le Chevalier au lion* (*Yvain*) is discussed in chapters Three and Four. The division is quite similar to a collection of essays – yet more cohesive – with chapters being roughly twenty pages in length. The
authors stress that their ideas have been put together collectively but not univocally (again emphasising the concept of plural authorship and plurality in general): that the aim of their collaboration was not to foster one view on the Chrétien corpus, but to engage critically with and to approach openly ‘the contradictions and loose ends of romance narrative’ (13).

The focus of the opening chapter is on two short poems ascribed to Chrétien de Troyes, ‘Amors tençon et bataille’ and ‘D’Amors qui m’a tolu a moi’, often regarded as subordinate to the romances. For material supporting the arguments, the reader is referred to Appendices II and III, containing variant readings of the two poems and of Cligès respectively. Through the introduction of a list of key concepts (which also govern the focus in later chapters in the book), Sarah Kay reverses the conventional relationship between poetry and romance by postulating that the poems are by no means inferior to the romances, and by looking at the romances as though they were long poems. One of the key concepts, already introduced in the introduction, is *variance*. *Variance* describes a textual phenomenon used by Bernard Cerquiglini (*L’Eloge de la variante. Histoire critique de la philologie* [Paris: Seuil, 1989]) to interrogate the relationships between the written versions of medieval vernacular texts and their bearing on our perception of the notion of medieval authorship. Cerquiglini bases his approach on an earlier concept of Paul Zumthor’s, called *mouvance*. In his *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), Zumthor describes what he calls the ‘oeuvre mouvante’, that is, the variability of textual versions by anonymous or nearly anonymous authors which stands in contrast to comparatively ‘fixed texts’ in manuscripts of works by named late medieval authors. *Mouvance*, in contrast to *variance*, focuses more on the relationship between the oral and the written, whereas *variance* concentrates on written sources exclusively. Both *mouvance* and *variance* enforce a sense of multiplicity — a concept which Sarah Kay uses in her discussion of the manuscript transmission of Chrétien’s lyrics. The
lyrics’ capacity for *variance*, that is, the gamut of possible variation in a poem, is called ‘poetic spectrality’ (16).

By addressing the issue of narrative ‘paradoxicality’ (e.g., contradictory exclamations by the poet) reflected in the lyrics, Kay argues for their equal or even superior status to the romances: paradoxicality, by its very definition, opposes logic and thereby narrative chronology, impeding the advancement of the plot. What then fills the lines if the plot stands still? In moments of paradoxicality, the poet makes use of stylistic features such as repetition and resonance. This type of resonance or echo is also operating in the romances: Kay introduces the concept of ‘logical time’ or ‘thinking on the spot’, an idea advanced by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in ‘Le temps logique et l’assertion de certitude anticipée’ (*Ecrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1966). The notion of logical time is to be seen in opposition to chronological or ‘objective’ time, which represents the time of the sequence of events in the narrative. Logical time, on the other hand, is subjective and does not contribute to the advancement of the plot (just as paradoxicality decelerates the progress of the story-line in the lyrics). It only exists as a duration of time in the mind of the romantic character, a time of thinking and reflecting, of ‘thinking through’ things lived and experienced. It can represent the time of remembering or a time of making sense of an adventure (it is thus closely linked and yet opposed to adventure time, discussed in Chapter Three). Logical time can also be a time of emergency thinking, where the character has to come to a solution in a difficult or dangerous situation. This process of ‘thinking on the spot’, the authors see as analogous to ‘marching on the spot’, which represents the act of walking but the absence of a movement forward (3). The emphasis on logical time, apart from being explicitly discussed in Chapter 1, is also resonant in chapters Two, Three and Five.

Although Chapter One is one of the shorter chapters in the book, it seems to hold most of the weight of arguments as it
introduces several key concepts relied on later. For this reason, I would have wished for a more detailed (and correspondingly less compact) treatment of all the issues discussed.

Chapter Two has the broad theme ‘Imagination’. Virginie Greene explores the intricacies of this notion by viewing imagination as a ‘form of thinking potentially capable of producing knowledge’ (43) and thus presents to the reader the imaginative world of the romantic character in a new light. As Giorgio Agamben argues in his Infancy and History: On The Destruction of Experience (transl. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 2007), imagination was regarded as a form of knowledge, and therefore as a form of communication between the senses and the intellect, in antiquity and medieval times, only to be stripped of its cognitive potential with the advent of the Cartesian era. Greene’s readings of Le Chevalier de la charrette and Guillaume d’Angleterre are guided by Agamben’s thesis on imagination as well as by Aristotle’s On the Soul.

Yet another thread is woven into the construction of this chapter: the concept of ‘Psychologic’. Psychology, although very much a post-medieval term, was born out of ancient studies on the nature of the soul which gained popularity in later centuries inter alia through the twelfth-century translation of Aristotle’s On the Soul by James of Venice. Using the allegorical figure of ‘Psychologic’ in dialogue with another called ‘the Poet’, Greene focuses on matters of intersubjectivity, such as the internalisation of shame, and presents the romantic character as one who is not only acting but also thinking; ‘Psychologic’ is used as a device to bring this process of thinking to the surface.

This chapter provides a more vivid read, sometimes bordering on the humorous, and its tone is more explanatory. The constantly interrupting voices of ‘Psychologic’ and the Poet, however, are at best challenging and more often irritating. ‘Psychologic’ keeps interrogating the Poet on matters of conscience, thought and love; the Poet answers to the best of his ability. As pointed out in the introduction, their
dialogue does not serve as a pedagogic or humorous device (although it often gives that impression), nor does it actually lead the reader anywhere (cf. p.12). Nonetheless, I have found this chapter to be thought-provoking and engaging.

The following chapter transports us right back into matters of temporality. As with most of the chapters, a critical theory underlies the arguments brought forward here: M. M. Bakhtin argues that adventure has its specific logic of space and time which is often disjoined from the narrative flow (‘Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel’ in The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994). Adventure time is the time of comprehending the meaning of an adventure previously lived. It is therefore linked to logical time in the sense that it exists outside the chronological order of narrative events. In ‘Adventures in Wonderland’, Zrinka Stahuljak shapes the understanding of adventure around the boundary between experience and knowledge, overcome by intersubjective speech acts. She further points out that romantic characters may set out as the subjects of adventure, but ultimately end up becoming its objects. The term ‘adventure’ itself represents a conflation of the semantic roots of the verbs advenire and evenire, which give Old French aventure, ‘an event that is to come’ (79). The chapter emphasizes the considerable gap between the time when adventure occurs (experience) and the time when it is understood (knowledge). This knowledge about the nature of adventure and its meaning is usually gained through other characters. Stahuljak supports her arguments through a close study of passages from Le Chevalier de la charrete and Le Conte du graal. The prime example of suspense between experience and knowledge is Perceval’s encounter with the Hideous Damsel at Arthur’s court. She enlightens him as to the meaning of the grail scene and reproaches him for not having spoken at the right moment. The same suspense is also reflected in the use of the Future Perfect tense, i.e., the sense that the adventure
will have happened. Adventure is only made sense of retrospectively, as Stahuljak points out.

Chapter Three brings up familiar views on the Chrétien corpus, such as studies on the notion of wonder (merveil); Perceval’s silence at the grail scene; or Yvain’s forgetfulness, which leads him to lose his wife and also his mind. The new concept of adventure time is skilfully interwoven with some of the ‘conventional’ views on the material and, for a reader familiar with medieval French romance, makes this chapter not just interesting but also very accessible reading.

The focus of Chapter Four is on the romances Erec et Enide and Yvain. Sharon Kinoshita studies the male chivalric subject as one caught between female authority and chivalric honour. Both Erec and Yvain stand on opposite sides of the struggle to balance the public and the private life: Erec forgets his chivalric duties and becomes a ‘houseman’ whereas Yvain misses Laudine’s deadline due to his immersion in adventures. Both are able to strike a balance in the end, however without the help of their wives: Erec must rescue Enide who is about to be married to another man and can only be saved by armed force; Yvain must become ‘the Knight of the Lion’ and come to his wife’s rescue to be reconciled with her again. Furthermore, the focus of investigation also turns to female protagonists, showing that Chrétien’s women, too, experience episodes of ‘thinking on the spot’. Enide finds her own voice when defending her husband, after having been silent at her betrothal to him. Yvain’s wife, Laudine, is caught in interior discourse over matters of politics: portrayed as the defenceless widow, she must remarry to secure a protector of her fountain. As a figure of female authority, she is rather quick at agreeing to marry her former husband’s killer, and then unforgiving once Yvain misses her deadline. It is, in fact, Laudine who controls events in Yvain’s life: in rebuking Yvain she sets in motion the steps that will lead to Yvain’s becoming ‘the Knight of the Lion’, and to the reconciliation with his former self and with his wife. She is also first and foremost a strategist: her actions are politically motivated rather than emotionally.
(like Enide’s) and she seems, in Kinoshita’s words, a woman ‘who can turn her emotions on and off literally like clockwork’ (134). Female agency was no fiction in Chrétien’s time: his patroness Marie de Champagne was regent of Champagne while her husband was on pilgrimage and even after his death. It is therefore not surprising to find this link between Chrétien’s historical and his poetic reality.

Sharon Kinoshita’s chapter skilfully links her study of the romances with the historical reality of Chrétien’s poetic activity. She further attributes a more important role to female characters than has hitherto been acknowledged, presenting them as driving elements of plot and as having voices of their own which are heard through the process of logical time. Rather than seeing them as emotionally-driven puppets acting as supporting characters for their male counterparts, Chrétien’s women are rational beings capable of internalising events for themselves, and without an intermediary.

The final chapter is entitled ‘Forgetting to conclude’ and is based on readings of Cligès and Le Conte du graal in which the theme of forgetting, and by the same token remembering, are closely linked to how the narrative functions or dysfunctions. Peggy McCracken studies the two romances through the prism of memory, diffracting into the familiar concepts of logical time, imagination and adventure. Fenice, the female protagonist in Cligès, does not want to be remembered as a second Iseult – the adulterous queen in love with her husband’s nephew – yet, this is precisely what happens. After Fenice, all subsequent empresses of Greece are kept prisoners in the imperial palace: what is remembered is the adulterous relationship between Cligès and Fenice, not the fact that Cligès’ uncle Alis was never entitled to take a wife in the first place. In Le Conte du graal, memory is more often absent and forgetfulness takes its place: Perceval first forgets his mother, then God and finally himself. It is only towards the end of the poem that he begins to ‘remember’ and unfortunately the narrative breaks up shortly after that; it never ‘concludes’...
This chapter has replaced the more conventional conclusion for a reason: as much as Chrétien’s *oeuvre* is in itself inconclusive, so is this book. At the end of Chapter Five, the authors have not spoken the last word concerning the material, nor do they intend to do so. Questions are deliberately left unresolved – after all, Perceval never made it back to the Grail castle either – and the reader is left to continue the quest on his or her own. This should not be viewed negatively, since the questions are actually more interesting than the answers. Likewise, Chrétien’s characters do not define themselves by finding solutions, but by reflecting on their problems – a quality that is mirrored in the style of this book.

*Thinking through Chrétien de Troyes* represents a stimulating approach to the study of the works of Chrétien. By bringing in the concept of ‘logical time’, contrasting it with ‘adventure time’ and advocating imagination as a legitimate means of acquiring knowledge, the ‘Chrétien girls’ (as they took to calling themselves) invite modern readers to reassess their thinking about medieval thinking and to redefine their image of the medieval romantic character. It further balances out the relationship between the poems and the romances and also between the male and the female. This being said, the work also represents the condensed knowledge of five experts in the field of medieval French studies, and this can be felt throughout the book. I would have wished for a more explicit treatment of the main topics mentioned above: a work so abundant in fresh ideas and theories should not have to content itself with less than two hundred pages – a contributing factor to its density. Although this is not stated explicitly, the book does not seem to be directed at the ‘student market’, since knowledge of complex theoretical ideas and familiarity with a wider range of works on textual criticism are assumed. It should, however, prove invaluable for any serious study of medieval romance, either as a stimulus for new ideas or as a theoretical framework in general. My own understanding of the corpus of medieval French literature and of
medieval textual criticism, and my research, have benefited greatly from following the authors through their work.

Marie-Luise Theuerkauf  
Department of Early and Medieval Irish  
University College Cork  
marie.theuerkauf@gmail.com